

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

REMNANTS #9

K.A. Applegate

MADE BY RAFIANS

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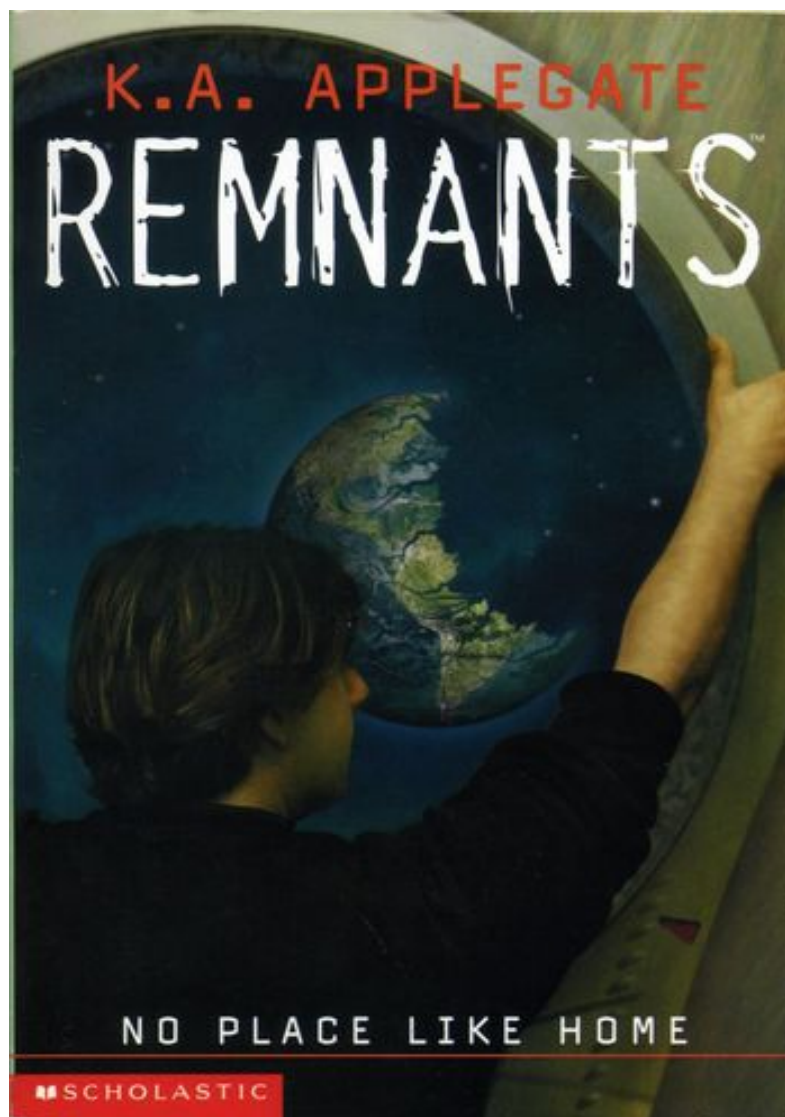
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CHAPTER 1

NOW WAS NOT THE TIME TO START.

The Dividing could not be rushed.

Three Isolated Corridors could only disregard the foolish wishes of the Quorum. They encouraged him to ignore the ancient rules. To speed up rituals that ensured the health of the Children.

Foolish. Three Isolated Corridors was trained to protect the balance. He could not hurry — would not! He would not force the Dividing to fit the Quorum's petty plans and strategies.

The rituals must be followed. The strongest, smartest of the People must be elected.

Some said the ancient rituals should be laid aside. The Quorum said balance was imposed by the Shipwrights, who only wanted the Children to be few in number and easily enslaved.

Perhaps.

Finally, it was agreed to follow the rituals.

Quickly. But Three Isolated Corridors could only work so fast. The rituals exhausted him. He needed his rest.

The Quorum thought they could intimidate him because he was young, because little time had passed since the Riders had cut down his mentor. But even if this was the first time he had led the rituals, he knew what was proper.

Slowly, Three Isolated Corridors walked to the circle of exchanging. The *daix* were waiting. Three Isolated Corridors noted with satisfaction that their skin was bloated with *nen* and their eyes were glazed from its effects. By contrast, the *nya* was bright-eyed, and he watched with fantastic concentration as Three Isolated Corridors wiped the object clean and placed it within the circle.

Three Isolated Corridors often thought the hyperawareness was misplaced. He felt it was the *nya*, not the *daix*, who could use a little relief, a little forgetfulness. Perhaps he got it as the *nen* flowed. Of course, there was only one way to know that and Three Isolated Corridors wasn't volunteering. Giving everything for the good of the camp was an honor, of course, but he wasn't in any hurry. Someday, yes, but not anytime soon.

Well. The *nya* had waited long enough. Three Isolated Corridors nodded to the *daix*. The *nen* began to flow, slowly at first and then faster. The fluid was drained from three large containers through metallic hoses that had never been used until this sacred day. The *nen* arched into the air and flowed over the *nya*. And as it flowed, the *nya* began to dissolve.

Now the flow of *nen* dribbled off to nothing. The *nya* was dissolving faster. The *daix* put down their hoses and began the stately first steps of the Dance of Birth. Three Isolated Corridors turned his attention to the object, which was beginning to fill.

Three Isolated Corridors waved his tentacles in the looping movements of the ritual. As he watched, pale spongy buds began to form. Four — no, five. He had matched well.

The buds grew rapidly. In each one, Three Isolated Corridors could see the slender translucent legs and rapidly beating hearts forming. He felt some of his exhaustion give way to tenderness. New life — it was so delicate, so precious. These young buds who had not yet been named by the People could become anything. Among their number might even be a new Sentient.

Perhaps.

There were those who said the People were doomed. Those who said the new Expositor favored integration with the Humans. Those who said that the one born with the ability to sense Mother's mood had lost its mind, was signing nothing but gibberish. Three Isolated Corridors didn't believe it. He had never concerned himself with rumors.

Now was not the time to start. The camp was full of vessels awaiting the Rite of Culling. There was much work to be done.

CHAPTER 2

"HELLO? IS SOMEONE DOWN THERE?"

Roger Dodger was bored. He was tired of hanging out with Tate and Tamara. Tired of the lame video games Billy had created. Tired of living in this faked-up town all of the others were so proud of.

If you asked him — and nobody had — Billy hadn't done a very good job making this place. The movie theater played only two old films that were in the *Mayflower's* database: *Titanic* and *Men in Black*. The food at Taco Bell wasn't salty enough. And all of the cartoons in town, mostly clerks and shoppers in the stores, were much too old.

Everyone around here was too old. Except for Edward. And Edward was too little. All Roger Dodger wanted was to hang out with someone his own age. Problem was: He was the only ten-year-old left in the universe.

Roger Dodger had had lots of friends back on Earth. But all of those kids were gone now. Even Noah Rosetti, his best friend.

Only eighty people got to board the *Mayflower*, a space shuttle that blasted off just before Earth was destroyed. Roger Dodger's mother said they were very special to be chosen.

Lots of people died while they were sleeping on the shuttle. Some molded and turned to "cheese." Worms ate others. Others dried out and turned into mummies. Teeny-tiny meteorites made holes in others.

Roger Dodger didn't know what had happened to his mother and father. Olga and the other grownups wouldn't let him see them. They just said his parents hadn't woken up.

Now they were on some huge ship. And there were aliens: Riders and Blue Meanies. The Riders were Roger Dodger's favorite. They had cool hover-boards that were like big flying skateboards.

The Riders weren't very nice, though. They'd killed Errol. And he wasn't the only one who'd been lost to the ship. Violet's mom had drowned. The Blue Meanies had gotten Mr. Hwang with their fléchette guns. Others were gone, too.

There were only seventeen people left.

Things hadn't been so bad when they were out roaming the ship, searching for the bridge, fighting aliens. Then nobody had worried about what he wore, when he went to bed, or how often he bathed. He hadn't been expected to come in for meals or mind his manners. They hadn't had tables or houses or food or baths or beds.

Roger Dodger missed being dirty. He missed being tired, sweaty, thirsty, and desperate.

He was bored.

Roger Dodger kept wishing the adults would get sick of playing make-believe and do something real. Finally he'd decided to do something real himself.

He ate breakfast with Tate and Tamara. After the food was gone but before Tamara finished her coffee, Roger Dodger got up and moved toward the back door.

"Where you heading?" Tate asked. Her tone was casual. She wouldn't try to stop him.

Neither would Tamara. Tamara wasn't interested in him. Her pretty hazel eyes were distant and surrounded by charcoal bruises. Roger wondered If she missed her baby. The Baby.

Roger Dodger thought that was creepy. The Baby was a mutation that none of the Remnants wanted to think about for very long.

"Just going to hang out," Roger Dodger said.

Tate nodded and he thrust open the door and escaped into the backyard. He passed an untouched swing set — did Tate and Billy really think he'd be interested in a slide and jungle gym after all he'd been through? Roger Dodger headed into a thin line of palm trees.

Another dozen yards and he stepped from his own backyard and into the desert surrounding Violet's property. He began climbing a slight hill to her house. His orange T-shirt clung to his narrow shoulders as he reached the top of the hill and stepped onto a pebbled path.

Roger Dodger broke out into a cold sweat. His heart beat too hard, too fast. He smiled. This was fun!

Right in front of him was a plain, wood-framed basement door. Roger Dodger licked his lips, wiped his sweaty palms on his shorts, then stepped forward and tried the knob. The door swung open. Roger Dodger stepped into Violet's cool, damp basement. The floor was bare dirt, the walls lined with stone. Violet didn't need a washer and dryer, garden tools, or other basement junk, so the large space was empty.

Almost.

Roger Dodger's eyes went to one corner. A rickety old wooden cabinet leaned against the wall. The green paint on it was peeling, the wood was half rotted. The cabinet was the kind of thing you'd never notice unless you were nosy and wanted to know what Violet had to put away in it.

Roger Dodger knew what was inside. He'd heard Violet and Jobs arguing.

His sneakers made no noise as he crossed the basement and opened the cabinet. Two Rider weapons gleamed in the dim light. A sword and a boomerang.

Most of the weapons they'd collected from the Riders and Meanies were up on the bridge, locked away in a safe with only one key that Billy had hidden somewhere. Collecting the weapons had been part of their deal with the aliens,

Roger Dodger wasn't sure why Violet had kept these two weapons, but ever since he'd heard Jobs telling her how dangerous it was, he'd been planning this moment.

Roger Dodger was reaching into the cabinet when a floorboard above him settled, making his heart leap up. Was Violet home? Probably. There was really [nowhere](#) else to go.

He glanced toward the open door and then eagerly picked up the boomerang and paused to admire its razor-sharp blade. He wanted to learn to throw it. So he could protect himself from Riders or Meanies or whatever. And for fun. And because the boomerang was the coolest, realest thing in *Billyland*.

One thing worried Roger Dodger: That he might get into trouble if Violet discovered he had taken the boomerang.

But then he realized he could practice throwing the boomerang in Violet's basement. That way he could leave the boomerang right where he'd found it. And she'd never know.

Roger Dodger stepped back against one wall. He'd thrown a boomerang once when the Riders were attacking them. It was easy. You just tossed it like a Frisbee and it automatically came back. The only tricky part was catching it again without letting it cut you. Roger Dodger'd had a little problem with that part the last time. D-Caf's thigh had gotten cut when he missed. D-Caf was still limping.

Roger Dodger shook off the memory. This was different. That had been during a crazy battle. Riders everywhere. He was all alone in the basement now. If he couldn't catch the boomerang, he'd just get out of its way.

Without another thought, Roger Dodger tossed the boomerang. He was thrilled to watch the sharp-edged weapon flying straight and fast, turning before reaching the far wall and coming

toward him. Roger Dodger focused his attention on the speeding weapon, flexing his knees, preparing. He had to catch it just right or he'd lose his hand.

"Hello? Is someone down here?"

Violet. Roger Dodger spun toward her voice. He saw a glimpse of gauzy white skirt floating above the stairs, remembered the danger, turned back.

A blur of movement.

Close!

He brought up his hands to shield his forehead from the blade, heard a puzzling, gurgling noise, and watched with surprise as the floor rushed up toward him.

CHAPTER 3

"CHOOSE CAREFULLY."

Seventy Sacred Truths had a simple job: Guard the periphery of the camp. A simple job made complicated, tedious, and dull by Eight Spinning Wheels.

Eight Spinning Wheels. The Children had chosen his name well. His tentacles never stopped moving. They probably waved as he slept.

Seventy Sacred Truths had been ignoring Eight Spinning Wheels since they were buds and he would have liked to ignore him now. But he had been given the order to follow his endless wavings and report any new or dangerous rantings to his superiors. It was a difficult task, but Seventy Sacred Truths welcomed the opportunity to show his devotion to the True Path.

His devotion had burned brighter since the Election of the Dividing. That was when his fellow Children had decided he wasn't fit to serve as *nya* or even *daix*. Fully half of the camp had been chosen, but he had been thrown in with the misfits, the imbeciles, and the cowardly.

He would show the Children how wrong they were. He'd see to it that Seventy Sacred Truths was a name long remembered.

Now he scanned the woods surrounding this secret camp, searching for the sign from his superiors. Nothing. Nothing yet. But it would come. And when it did, his new life would begin. He wasn't sure what form that new life would take, but at least he'd be free from Eight Spinning Wheels's ravings.

"The Humans," Eight Spinning Wheels was saying now. "It is clear to me they are a race without honor or morals." His tentacles moved lazily as he pondered the nature of their enemy. He seemed to imagine he had the wisdom of a Sentient when, in truth, he wasn't even a particularly good guard. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he forgot to watch the woods for intruders.

"Yes?" Seventy Sacred Truths said. Eight Spinning Wheels required only a few words, a little interaction to continue his conversation.

"Of course," Eight Spinning Wheels said. "Simply consider the promises they have broken. The one called Yago has tried to lure Children away from their true religion. The one called Billy changed the course of Mother without permission. Who knows what other lies they have told."

"Yes, who knows," Seventy Sacred Truths said. His eyes ran over the trees once again. Scanning for the sign, always scanning. Seventy Sacred Truths had been searching for so long that the movement was second nature to him.

"We will regain control," Eight Spinning Wheels said, looking out over the birthing field with apparent satisfaction. "The humans are arrogant. They think they dominate us because the one called Billy exerts control over Mother. But they do not dominate us."

"No?" Seventy Sacred Truths asked.

"They cannot repair Mother, can they?" Eight Spinning Wheels said.

Seventy Sacred Truths didn't bother to answer. He knew he wasn't required to.

"They cannot return Mother to her true power," Eight Spinning Wheels said. "So why should we bargain with them?"

"Why not ask the Quorum?" Seventy Sacred Truths asked. "They agreed to the Big Compromise."

"We would have been destroyed if they had not," Eight Spinning Wheels said quickly. He was nothing if not numbingly loyal. "But everything has changed now. We are no longer in a position of weakness. We have increased our numbers. We have built an army such as the Children have never seen."

"The army may be larger than any we have seen," Seventy Sacred Truths said. "But that doesn't mean it will be large enough."

"I hear ..." Eight Spinning Wheels paused cautiously and then rushed on, apparently unable to resist sharing the rumor he'd heard. "I hear this is not the full extent of our forces."

Now this was interesting. "You mean there is another camp?" Seventy Sacred Truths asked, trying to hide his concern. As far as he knew, all of the surviving Children had gathered here. If there were more somewhere else on the ship ...

But Eight Spinning Wheels was waving him off. "I'm talking about an alliance with the Riders," he said, his tentacles jerking with excitement.

Seventy Sacred Truths realized he'd underestimated Eight Spinning Wheels's value. The rumor of an alliance — this was important news. Seventy Sacred Truths was shocked by the plan's audacity. An alliance with the Riders? It would have been unthinkable under the Quorum that had led the People since before Seventy Sacred Truths had been named. But many of the old leaders had been killed in the war. New leaders meant new ideas. But this was going too far.

This was shocking.

What kind of corrupt leaders made alliances with savages? Seventy Sacred Truths was so surprised he almost missed the signal — four quick flashes of infrared light picked up by a special implant in his suit.

It was beginning!

Seventy Sacred Truths could already see movement on the far side of the camp — some of his fellow acolytes putting the plan into action. His suit began to vibrate as the Quorum called on the guards to repel the mutiny.

"Let's go!" Eight Spinning Wheels said. He was already turning toward the action, ready to martyr himself to protect the Quorum and their desperate alliances.

Seventy Sacred Truths acted before Eight Spinning Wheels could fire up his weapons. In a breach of safety procedures, Seventy Sacred Truths already had his suit powered. He brought up his fléchette gun and pointed it at Eight Spinning Wheels.

"Seventy Sacred Truths?"

"That is no longer my name. You may call me Yago's Catlike Agility."

"Why would I do that?" Eight Spinning Wheels asked.

"It's a new era." With that, Yago's Catlike Agility opened fire. He took down Eight Spinning Wheels.

The Children recovered swiftly. Counterattacked. Yago's Catlike Agility saw a half dozen reinforcements coming toward him. He lowered his weapon.

"He was one of them!" he said when the others were close enough. "There are more in the woods!"

The reinforcements moved off. Yago's Catlike Agility moved quickly toward the field and joined the others like him.

Three Glowing Moons— now known as Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit—was already there, giving orders. "You!" he said to Yago's Catlike Agility. "Check the vessels on the periphery. We want only well-established buds. Choose carefully."

Yago's Catlike Agility joined one of the others — one whose name he could never remember — and they headed out. The first vessel they inspected was empty. The second held new buds, still spindly and translucent. But, in the third vessel, the two buds were well grown. Only a shallow pool of *nen* remained in the vessel. "Take them."

Yago's Catlike Agility signaled his agreement. While the others covered him, he bared his tentacles and gently pulled on the closest bud. It came free with aching slowness. Its liquidy black eyes opened and met the gaze of Yago's Catlike Agility. Its eyes were questioning, fearful, sad.

Yago's Catlike Agility shuddered. Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit promised that interrupting the budding would have no ill effects. But what if he was wrong? How could he know? What if they were gathering hundreds of buds that would never lose that look?

No.

Everything would be fine. These buds were bound for glory. They would be part of the army that brought the one true king to rule.

It was a new era.

The era of Yago and the True Path.

CHAPTER 4

THERE WAS NO GOING BACK NOW.

Jobs was making his way down the weird streets of *Billyville* on his way to what 2Face insisted on calling a "tactical meeting." The Remnants were gearing up for war with the Meanies and probably Amelia and her mysterious buddies.

Edward, Jobs's little brother, was skipping ahead down the unnaturally perfect sidewalk. Somewhere Edward had picked up a skinny oak tree branch. He was whacking the branch experimentally against picket fence, streetlight, stop sign. With each whack, a new sound: one for the fence, a higher tone from the streetlight. Jobs briefly considered telling Edward to stop, but decided not to bother. Why not let the kid have some fun? And a little dent here and there wouldn't be a big deal for Billy. He could easily, instantly fix any damage Edward might do. Just like he patched up any wear and tear to the buildings and vaporized the garbage each night.

True, Billy was desperately busy. On the not-too-distant border of the humans' zone, he was building a wall. Not with his hands, of course. He was building the wall the same way he'd built *Billyville*: with his mind. A mind that was now merged with the ship's computer. He was currently working on the section behind the rarely visited sporting goods store.

Jobs had watched the process that morning, when the steel-like squares were appearing just beyond his backyard. Each piece of the wall was about four feet square. Billy was systematically filling in the space, starting at the ground and moving toward the ceiling that separated the environment from the place in the ship he and the other Remnants called the attic. It was where Billy lived.

A new square appeared roughly every fifteen seconds. Once a long, thin section was complete, the metal pieces merged and the towering strip of wall shimmered like the surface of a lake for a few seconds before turning transparent.

Jobs knew the transparency was only on the inside. The outside of the wall remained solid, allowing the Remnants to see what might be coming while hiding their activities from their attackers.

The wall was like an enormous one-way mirror — with one important difference. The Remnants could do more than see through the wall, they could also *move* through it. Once on the other side, they were locked out and could get back in only if someone reached through and pulled them back into the Zone.

Jobs had exchanged dozens of e-mails with Billy, discussing and designing and redesigning the wall to protect the Remnants without making them feel imprisoned.

E-mail — that was how Billy preferred to communicate these days. Jobs hadn't actually seen him in more than a week.

"Jobs! Jobs, ow!" Edward was running toward him, clutching his right eye.

"What happened?!" Jobs asked.

"A piece — of bark or something. In my eye. It hurts."

Jobs gently pried his brother's hands away from his face. "Let me look."

The eye looked angry and red, but Jobs couldn't see any foreign objects in it. "I think you'll live. But give the branch a rest."

Edward nodded. Subdued now, he dropped the branch and stuck close to Jobs. Jobs reached out and put his hand on the top of his little brother's head. The surge of fondness for Edward was followed almost immediately by a numbing fear.

Was this how his parents felt when they heard about the Rock? The Rock — that's what the Remnants called the huge asteroid that wiped out Earth and sent them fleeing into space. Jobs was sure his parents felt the same dread he felt now.

Dread because the Remnants were going to war and his little brother was going to be in the middle of it and if anything happened to Edward, Jobs didn't know if he would be able to deal with the pain and the guilt.

This situation was his fault. He'd taken it upon himself to find the Remnants a new home. The vast resources of the ship's computer allowed him to search the immensity of space for a cozy planet, one with oxygen and a yellow star. His curiosity led him to search out the strange leftovers of Earth.

Earth was very, very far away and the pictures were hazy, but Jobs had recognized home — even if it was a bit smooshed. And that image, he could admit it now, had become an obsession.

Five hundred years had passed since the Rock hit. In cosmological terms, a handful of centuries was the blink of an eye. Earth was still reeling from the impact with the Rock.

But the fact that Earth still existed was amazing. Jobs himself had seen the asteroid knock the planet into three pieces. The largest chunk must have smashed into the moon because Earth today looked like a big planet welded to a smaller one. Seeing much more was difficult at this distance.

Jobs didn't know if Earth still had a breathable atmosphere. He didn't know if the planet could support life. Still, the wasted Earth drew him. He was intrigued by the possibility of finding some reminder of everything they'd left far, far behind. He felt the fact that Earth was still there was some sort of sign.

And so he'd been the one who'd forced the others to consider abandoning their compromise with the Meanies and Riders and heading for home. He'd planted the idea and then, stupidly, gone off on some doubtful mission in the depths of the ship.

His absence gave 2Face the opening she needed to put his plan in action. Put it in action *before* he'd considered all the angles.

By the time he'd returned to *Billyville*, the ship was heading for Earth. The change in course shattered their fragile agreement with the aliens. Put an end to the short period of peace they'd enjoyed.

But there was no going back now. The Meanies and the Riders would never trust them again after their betrayal. Now the only thing they could do was fight to stay alive. Because the aliens wanted them off the ship. One way, or another.

Jobs was engaged in a minute-by-minute battle with himself, trying to push away his misgivings and make the best of the situation he'd helped create. The Meanies or Riders could attack at any time. Minutes from now, the Remnants could be fighting a massive alien onslaught. Jobs had to make sure they were as prepared as possible.

This is why he felt 2Face's meeting was a distraction, a waste of valuable time. But 2Face had called the meeting and Jobs didn't dare miss it. He couldn't trust 2Face to make good decisions. That was painfully clear.

Edward and Jobs joined a crowd that was forming in front of Peet's Coffee. Violet. Mo'Steel and his mother, Olga. Roger Dodger. Tate and Tamara.

"Check out the daily weirdness, Duck," Mo'Steel said. He stepped aside so that Jobs could see into the circle.

Something was taking shape on the sidewalk. Simply forming out of thin air But these days watching stuff just appear felt commonplace. They'd all watched Billy imagine *Billyville* into being.

At first the thing resembled a small lizard. It grew, stretching up and up. At the same time, its neck elongated, its feet got bigger, and its green skin turned into leathery brown scales. Something papery and fragile like a homemade kite took form on its sides and began to flap in the wind. Wings. Abruptly the wings' parchment color turned to lizard green. Fuzzy, downy feathers appeared and then disappeared.

"I think it's supposed to be a dragon," Edward said. "But the wings are all wrong."

"Give Billy some time," Jobs said. "I think he's trying to create biologically based weapons to use against the Meanies, but remembering exactly how something looks and trying to figure out how to make it come to life is harder than we thought."

"A dragon?" Tamara's lip curled in distaste. "This isn't some kids' adventure movie. We need real weapons."

Jobs couldn't get used to Tamara's new liberated voice. Her real voice. It had a stronger Southern lilt now than it had when the Shipwright was talking through her. The cool nastiness hadn't changed much.

"This is only part of our arsenal," Jobs said, trying for a calm, patient tone. "Billy is creating plenty of Rider and Meanie weapons for us to use, but we thought it would be smart to have some things our enemies wouldn't understand. We figure the Meanies are always going to handle a fl chette gun better than we will."

"I like it," Mo'Steel said. "The Meanies will never predict a dragon will breathe fire."

Tamara's angry dark eyes were focused on Jobs. "Why not get the Meanies guessing about rocket launchers, antiaircraft artillery, and stealth bombers? With the right gear, we could fight this battle from behind a console the way we did back on good old Earth."

"Two problems." Jobs was beginning to feel testy. He and Billy had made the decisions about weapons carefully. He didn't need Tamara's attitude. "The first is that we have exactly one trained soldier: You. Correct me if I'm wrong but I assume flying a stealth bomber takes more than a can-do attitude."

Tamara watched him coldly, ignoring the dragon that continued to shape-shift on the sidewalk.

"Second problem," Jobs said more quietly. "Billy couldn't find any technical schematics for weapons in the shuttle's computer."

"None?" Tate asked.

Jobs shrugged. "None, k's a bit of a mystery."

"Maybe there wasn't enough memory," Edward suggested.

"Well, the files contain some expendable stuff like comic book reproductions, link directories, and musical scores," Jobs said. "You'd think weapons would be given priority over the lyrics from *Rent*!"

"Maybe the folks at NASA didn't want us to have weapons," Olga said. "Maybe they wanted us to be a force for peace in the universe."

That comment was greeted with smiles. So far they'd spent a lot of their time doing damage.

A beat passed. Then Olga cleared her throat. "Well. What about the art files?" she asked. "Are there any weapons we can copy from paintings or books?"

"Billy did a thorough search of the archive," Jobs said. "The fiction tends toward allegories and fairy tales. No military stuff. He did find a few weapons in paintings but it's all old stuff. Gunpowder. Simple guns. Cannons."

Without thinking about it, Jobs turned to Violet. She was the only one of them who really knew anything about art. He expected her to comment. As soon as he turned his attention to her, he noticed she was pale — paler than usual.

Violet was tall and thin with silky blond hair. She was the type of pretty girl that wouldn't have given Jobs a second look back on Earth.

But here, they'd developed a kind of relationship. Jobs trusted Violet more than anyone on the ship except Mo'Steel. He respected her intelligence and bravery. He didn't call her his girlfriend because that term sounded too frivolous to be a part of the violent, harsh life they were leading.

Jobs hadn't seen Violet much in the past few days. He'd been consumed with preparing for battle. Now he realized something was wrong. The gauzy white outfit she was wearing looked rumpled. Usually she was perfectly pulled together

Violet shrugged, apparently not too engaged in the conversation. "I'd expect Billy to find only primitive weapons," she said. "By the time sophisticated weapons were being built, important art was no longer representational."

"You said it yourself," Tamara said to Jobs. "I'm the only one here with weapons training. Why didn't Billy consult with me?"

Suddenly, Jobs felt very tired. "I'll give you his e-mail address," he said. "You can make all of the suggestions you want."

The proto-dragon spread its wings, forcing the little group to scatter. Jobs squinted in the wind as the misshapen thing flapped, flapped, and rose a few inches off the ground. Then there was a puff of purple smoke and the dragon disappeared. Another failed experiment. Jobs sighed.

2Face chose that moment to stick her head out of Peet's. She held a paper coffee cup in one hand. "Could you guys come in now?" she asked, not bothering to hide her impatience. "We're ready to start."

CHAPTER 5

"WOOLLY ODDS."

"We have a lot to cover," 2Face said, "so let's get started."

Kubrick sat on the sofa and listened impassively as 2Face outlined guard duty shifts. He considered the whole proceeding a farce. He'd only come because he hadn't seen 2Face in almost a week, not even from a distance, and he had an almost physical need to be in her presence.

He didn't chat.

He didn't sip at some high-end coffee drink.

Nobody chose to sit next to him on the couch. Even in this strange group — Violet with her missing finger, 2Face with her burned face, Yago with his warped mind — he was the village freak. Untouchable.

Mother, the computer that ran the ship, had turned him into a human guinea pig. Apparently, she'd been lonely for the aliens who created her, the Shipwrights, so she'd tried to remake Kubrick in their image. The Shipwrights had transparent skin so she'd removed his skin and replaced it with something transparent, synthetic, and dead to all sensation.

Kubrick couldn't feel anything. He hadn't even noticed when a Meanie had seriously injured his hand. Anyone who was interested could see his muscles, veins, and little deposits of yellowish fat.

Thing was: Nobody was interested.

He was gross.

Gross in his own eyes. That's why he covered up as much skin as possible with clothes and avoided mirrors.

Gross in the eyes of the other Remnants. Their gaze registered his existence and then moved quickly away, the way you see roadkill but don't stop for the details.

The irony was that Mother herself had eventually decided she preferred humans, too. When the Shipwright Baby finally revealed itself. Mother hadn't welcomed it home. No. By then, her alliance had shifted and she'd helped Billy take it down.

She'd decided Billy was the one. Put Billy in charge. He'd used his new position to create this weird fantasy world that was supposedly someone's idea of Utopia. Houses, fast food, and a high-tech fence to keep out the scary aliens.

Peace. It had given Kubrick only one thing he valued: Privacy. He took full advantage, hiding in his cell of a house for days, writing a journal nobody would ever read. He wrote in his native Italian, a kind of secret code since he was probably the only person left in the universe who understood the language.

He amused himself by seeing how long he could closet himself away before someone contacted him in person or by link or e-mail.

The record was seventy-four hours.

Over and over, his isolation was broken by the same two people: D-Caf and 2Face.

D-Caf held no real interest in Kubrick. He was nothing but a pawn on a chessboard controlled by Yago, and Yago was suffering from an unsightly messiah complex. Kubrick pointedly ignored his attempts to make nice-nice.

2Face was different. She was interested Kubrick. She was another grotesque, burned in a fire back on Earth. The skin on half of her face dripped like melted wax and yet she carried herself like a queen. She turned her ugliness and the discomfort it caused others into a kind of power.

Kubrick didn't deserve 2Face's friendship, but he needed It. It was the only thing in this awful place worth surviving for.

As 2Face blithely droned on, Tate watched Noyze shifting impatiently in her chair and noted Dr Cohen's stony expression. *Watch out, 2Face*, Tate thought with amusement. *The dam is about to burst*.

2Face didn't seem to notice — or more likely was intentionally ignoring — the crackling tension in the faked-up coffee shop. She had a list of orders to make and she was making them quickly and efficiently. Somewhere along the line, 2Face had forgotten she wasn't a general and that the Remnants were nobody's army.

"An alliance between the Meanies and the Riders is unlikely," 2Face was saying. "But it is possible that the two separate groups will attack us at the same time. Strategically, that would be the smartest thing to do and the Meanies, at least, are no fools. If we find ourselves under a two-pronged attack, take out the Meanies first. Their mini-missiles pose the greatest threat over long distances. Once the Meanies are neutralized —"

"You mean killed," Noyze said.

2Face made no attempt to hide her irritation. "Whatever," she said.

"You may feel it's no big deal to 'neutralize' a unique race," Noyze said quietly. "But I believe all of these preparations for war are premature."

Tate watched the younger girl with appreciation. She was brave to take on 2Face. And that wasn't her only admirable quality. She was also an independent thinker. So many of the others seemed willing to follow whoever yelled the loudest or carried the biggest stick. Lately, that had been 2Face and Billy.

"And you'd prefer what?" 2Face asked coldly. "That we're unprepared when the aliens attack?"

"I'd prefer that the aliens didn't attack," Noyze said.

"Okay. How do you suggest we arrange that?" 2Face asked.

"A treaty," Noyze said.

"I agree," Dr Cohen said. "Fighting should be a last resort. A step we take only after we're certain diplomacy won't work."

"The numbers back Noyze," Mo'Steel said. "Seventeen humans against two bands of aliens? Woolly odds. I say we spend some sweat to crank up our chances of winning." Over by the door, Burroway snorted. "It's a little late to make deals with the aliens," he said arrogantly.

Was it Tate's imagination or did Burroway look older? She didn't remember his hair being so gray or his nose so prominent. How old was he anyway? Not more than forty. That was the upper age limit NASA put on *Mayflower* passengers.

"What's the harm in trying?" Tate spoke up.

Tamara shook her head angrily. "They'll think we're weak!"

Tate felt a pinprick of remorse. She knew Tamara wanted this battle, felt she needed it to regain the others' trust. Tate was sympathetic, but only to a point. She wanted Tamara to find another way to prove her trustworthiness.

"The aliens would have to be total suckers to agree to another treaty with us," Anamull said.

"We shouldn't make assumptions about what the Meanies will do," Jobs said. "We can't begin to understand their motives or emotions."

"Beside, it's not a mutually exclusive choice," Noyze said. "Some of us can stay here and prepare for war. Others can go to the Meanies and try to make peace."

"It's a question of resources," 2Face argued. "We need everyone here getting ready for an attack and we need everyone here fighting when the attack occurs. Since we don't know when that will be —"

"Anyway, what makes you think the Meanies would listen?" Burroway demanded.

"It's worth a try," Noyze insisted.

"Not considering we already broke one treaty with them," 2Face said. "Now if we can get back to—"

"We can say breaking the treaty was a mistake," Noyze said. Her hands were clasped tensely in her lap. Noyze was treading on dangerous ground and Tate had the impression she knew it. "We can say — we can tell the Meanies not all of us wanted the ship's course altered."

"We all agreed!" 2Face shouted.

"No," Noyze said firmly. "Jobs, Mo'Steel, Kubrick, Tamara, Tate, Yago — plenty of us were in the basement when *you* convinced the rest of us to turn the ship. You told us the Meanies had killed Jobs and the others. You tricked us into believing the Meanies were more hostile than they —"

"They are hostile!" Violet said, her pretty face twisted angrily.

"They killed T.R.," Edward said with a protective look at Violet.

"And we've taken plenty of them out, too!" Noyze argued.

"You act like they're benign," Violet said. "Like they're pets or —"

"No, but—"

Jobs held up his right hand like a traffic cop and things quieted down. "You guys are forgetting one thing," he said. "We didn't just break the treaty by turning the ship toward Earth. Yago also broke it by attempting to convert Meanies."

Tate's eyes traveled to where Yago was sitting between Anamull and D-Caf on a big lime-green-and-coffee-brown sofa.

"I did nothing but put them on the True Path," Yago said with his blissed-out smile. Tate knew Tamara, and probably a lot of the others, thought Yago was faking it. She wasn't so sure. Something in her gut told her Yago truly believed what he said.

"The true path of kissing your feet," 2Face said contemptuously.

"You are not pure," Yago said sadly.

2Face snorted and rolled her eyes.

"If the main group of Meanies won't deal with us," Olga said, "maybe we could form an alliance with Yago's — um, believers."

Yago put his hands together in a prayer position and nodded slightly at 2Face. "An agreement may be possible. Under certain conditions."

"Are you naming terms for your cooperation?" 2Face demanded. "That's outrageous."

"How many believers do you have?" Olga asked.

"Aren't your followers in custody?" Jobs asked.

"I've got an idea," 2Face said loudly, drowning out the others, her one good eye flashing. "Why don't we turn Yago over to the Meanies as an expression of our goodwill?"

"So you agree we should talk to the Meanies?" Noyze said.

"I never —" 2Face said.

"Let's vote on it," Noyze said. "Everyone in favor of attempting to broker a peace or an alliance with the Meanies, raise your hand."

Tate shot a look at Tamara and swallowed nervously.

"Before you vote," 2Face said, her voice deadly calm, "you should know I'm not just expressing my opinion. I'm also speaking for Billy. And, as I'm sure you all know, Billy knows more about the Meanies than any of us can ever hope to know."

Tate saw Noyze's shoulders slump and the fight go out of her eyes. She seemed to know she'd lost. Nobody would vote against Billy. Tate wouldn't.

2Face smiled benignly. "Where was I? Oh. Right... If the Meanies and Riders attack at the same time... take out the Meanies first."

Tate sat back in her chair, disappointed. Oh, well. The revolution had been interesting while it lasted. In Tate's opinion, that hadn't been nearly long enough.

CHAPTER 6

"A BIG ASTEROID MAKES A BIG MESS."

"We need to see Billy," Jobs whispered. "Now." He was so cranked up, he'd dropped his voice even though he and Mo'Steel were alone under the streetlight.

Dusk had fallen during the meeting. Billy had the Zone set on a twenty-four-hour cycle that duplicated the rising and setting of the sun in Southern California. Jobs's internal clock told him it was about 8:10 Billytime.

The street was mostly deserted. Jobs had sent Edward home alone. Why not? They didn't have to worry about traffic or criminals here.

Some of the others — 2Face, Kubrick, Olga, Dr. Cohen, and Roger Dodger — were lingering in front of Peet's. Jobs kept one eye on them.

Violet had taken off immediately after the meeting. Jobs planned to get in touch with her as soon as he had a chance and find out what was bothering her.

But first things first.

Jobs wanted to get up to the attic and see Billy before 2Face went back upstairs.

"You want to just drop in?" Mo'Steel asked. "Mom taught me to call first. Give your hosts time to scrub the toilet."

Jobs knew Mo'Steel was joking, but he was in no mood. "You heard the way 2Face spoke for Billy — or pretended to. It made me nervous. Made me wonder why we haven't seen Billy in so long."

"He sends you e-mail," Mo'Steel said.

"I get e-mail with his name on it," Jobs said. "I don't know who writes it."

"Okay, now you sound paranoid," Mo'Steel said. "You think 2Face is keeping him hostage up there?"

"I don't know what I think," Jobs admitted. "Let's just go."

He knew they might be heading into danger Mo'Steel knew it, too, but he headed toward the elevator loose-limbed and confident. Jobs could never understand it. Mo'Steel wasn't stupid, but he actually sought out dangerous, scary situations.

As they made their way down the street, Jobs saw Roger Dodger approaching them. Jobs didn't like the way the kid looked. His eyes had a strange puzzled expression that seemed a lot like shock. Had he looked this way at the meeting? Jobs couldn't remember.

"I need to talk to you," Roger Dodger told Jobs. "Hi, Mo'Steel."

Jobs forced down a groan. The kid's timing couldn't be worse. Another five, ten minutes and 2Face would beat them back to the attic and they'd lose their chance to talk to Billy alone.

"Listen, we're kind of in a hurry." Jobs tried a laugh. "Top secret mission."

"It's about Violet," Roger Dodger said.

Jobs stopped walking. "What about Violet?"

Roger Dodger licked his lips nervously. "Something is going on at her house. Something strange."

"What do you mean *something strange*?" Jobs demanded.

Roger Dodger put his hands under his armpits and hugged himself tightly. He looked scared and that ticked Jobs off. Why should Roger Dodger be scared of Violet?

"You can tell us," Mo'Steel said quietly. He put a hand on Roger Dodger's shoulder.

"I — I don't know exactly," Roger Dodger said.

"How do you know anything about what's happening in Violet's house?" Jobs asked.

"I can't tell you." Roger Dodger pressed his lips together until they turned white.

Jobs didn't have time for this. Not now. "Listen, when you're ready to talk, I'll listen. But I don't have time to play games."

Annoyed by Roger Dodger's vagueness, not to mention his implication that Violet was involved in something unsavory, Jobs marched off toward the elevator Mo'Steel followed.

Roger Dodger stood on the curb, watching them go.

Mo'Steel didn't know what he expected to find in the attic but it wasn't a stone cottage with a red rosebush trained over a cornflower-blue door. A word rose up in his mind and the word was *cozy*.

True, the house — no, the *cottage* — was plunked down in an enormous gathering space that was clearly the work of alien architects. The two-story structure with its white picket fence and white shutters looked small and lost amid the towering metal walls decorated with geometric hieroglyphics.

"Where'd this come from?" Mo'Steel asked.

"From Billy's imagination, I guess," Jobs said. "That's where everything comes from these days."

"I like it," Mo'Steel said. "Only — it looks a little like the place Hansel and Gretel almost got baked."

"Don't worry," Jobs said. "I marked our trail back to the elevator."

"With bread crumbs?"

"What else?"

"Let's hope there aren't any birds around here," Mo'Steel said.

"Come on," Jobs said. "Let's see if Billy is home."

Mo'Steel met Jobs's gaze. "Interesting choice of words. If this place is a home, it's the first Billy has had in five hundred years."

Jobs opened the gate. They walked through and started up the brick walkway. Before they'd gotten halfway, the door opened and 2Face came out on the stoop. She was wearing flip-flops and shorts and eating an apple.

The message was clear. She was kicking back, relaxing. She was home. "Mo. Jobs," she said with a grin that was hard to read. "What do you think of the place?"

"Very nice," Mo'Steel said.

"Is Billy around?" Jobs asked, sounding very frustrated.

"Sure," 2Face said. "Working, as usual. Tamara just sent him some lengthy e-mail about weapons. Come on in, and I'll get him. Want something to drink?"

"Um, sure, thanks." Mo'Steel couldn't help smiling as 2Face climbed the stairs to tell Billy they were there. The scene was so normal it was weird.

Jobs perched on the edge of an overstuffed couch covered with red-and-black throw pillows. He watched 2Face come down the stairs and pad into the kitchen for the drinks.

"She's *living* here?" Jobs asked quietly.

"Looks like it," Mo'Steel said. "You're wiggling out, aren't you?"

"No. Well, a little." Jobs looked around uneasily, his gaze settling on a row of framed photos on the mantel. Mo'Steel walked over to look at them. One of the photos showed Billy and his adoptive parents in the grandstand at a rodeo. Another photograph was of a cottage not unlike this one. Probably somewhere in Chechnya, where Billy was born.

"I just— don't you think this is a little weird?" Jobs asked.

Mo'Steel shrugged. "We spent five hundred years on that tin can. I don't even know what weird is anymore."

Jobs merely grunted in response.

Billy came down the stairs and joined them on the couch. "Tamara feels we should have consulted her on the weapons," he said.

"I guess maybe we should have," Jobs admitted. Billy looked surprisingly relaxed, especially considering all of the work he was doing. The dark circles under his eyes had lightened somewhat. He looked well fed, slightly less bony. His dark bangs were neatly trimmed. Had 2Face done that? "How was the meeting?" Billy asked. "Um, fine." Jobs's eyes were on 2Face. She'd come into the room with a tray of drinks. He was silent as she put the tray down and sat next to Billy on the couch. So much for their plan of talking to Billy alone. Mo'Steel could feel Jobs's aggravation.

Probably Billy and 2Face could feel it, too. And yet 2Face's manner was confiding — as if they were old friends that could speak plainly now that they were alone.

Mo'Steel thought of Noyze. "Some people want to try for another treaty," he said.

Billy raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised.

So 2Face isn't discussing this stuff with him, Mo'Steel told himself. She'd certainly implied otherwise at the meeting.

"I have no interest in negotiating further with the Meanies," 2Face said simply.

"Don't you think we could earn back their trust?" Jobs asked Billy directly.

"I'm not —" Billy started.

Mo'Steel flinched when 2Face interrupted him. "It's not a question of their trusting us," she said forcefully. "It's a question of *our* trusting *them*. Mother is more than a ship to the Meanies. She's like their god or something. The Meanies are her children. No matter what they promise, they'll never surrender her to us."

"Are you sure?" Jobs asked. "Some of them have already abandoned Mother to follow Yago."

Billy smiled wanly. "I've felt the, the awe of the Meanies who follow Yago. It's powerful and —"

"Useful," 2Face said in a businesslike way. "I didn't want to say so in front of Yago, but we'll never turn him over to the True Children. His weird religion or whatever is turning Meanie against Meanie. That helps us."

"Maybe the Meanies will start concentrating on each other instead of us," Jobs said hopefully. "If that happens, we may get to Earth before they're in any position to attack us."

"So?" 2Face looked amused. She put her feet on the coffee table and wiggled her toes.

"So we'll be home," Jobs said evenly. "We can let the Meanies have Mother if it's so important to them."

A frown flittered across Billy's face. 2Face reached out and touched Billy's shoulder reassuringly.

"Maybe that could even be the basis of an agreement between us and the Meanies," Jobs said. "They let us hitch a ride to Earth and we promise to get out of their hair forever." 2Face laughed.

"What?!" Jobs demanded. Mo'Steel had rarely seen his friend so serious, so humorless.

"It's not going to be as simple as finding Earth and getting off," 2Face said. "Who knows what's going down on the old planet or what's left of it? My guess is that a big asteroid makes a big mess. We're going to need Mother for shelter. And without her resources, we'll never survive on Earth."

Billy nodded, sipping at his drink. "Mother is ours now," he said. "We're keeping her."

Jobs opened his mouth, but closed it without saying anything. He slowly got to his feet. "Come on, Mo. Let's go."

Mo'Steel got up, said goodbye to Billy and 2Face, and followed Jobs to the elevator. Jobs was glum as they rode down.

"Cheer up, duck," Mo'Steel said. "At least we know Billy wasn't kidnapped."

"No," Jobs said. "But he'll do whatever 2Face says, agree with whatever she thinks. She outmaneuvered us. Again."

"I guess that's the end of Noyze's peace treaty," Mo'Steel said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I guess we're gonna have to fight."

CHAPTER 7

"SHOULDN'T WE WARN EVERYONE?"

Boise, *Springfield*, *Indianapolis*, *Des Moines*, D-Caf thought. Memorizing state capitals. That was the kind of useless task D-Caf excelled at. Evidence of his painful loser status back on Earth. Well, maybe memorizing this stuff wasn't entirely useless. Practicing the list — he could do it alphabetically by state name or capital name — kept his mind busy at times like this. Calmed the nerves. Stopped him from busting a vein.

Yago, dressed all in white, was standing inside the defensive wall Billy had imagined into being. From within the humans' Zone, the wall looked gauzy, insubstantial. You had to look carefully to see the faint markings on the ground that marked its border.

A handful of Meanies, followers of Yago, stood silently outside the wall, waiting to receive the touch that only Yago could bestow. The aliens were only a few feet away, but D-Caf could see their eyes sliding past them without focusing. They couldn't see inside the wall. 2Face had said it was solid from their perspective.

D-Caf couldn't help thinking these Meanies were probably losers. He'd bet the other Meanies were happy to see them go.

"What are you waiting for?" Yago asked Ana-mull. His voice was grating, tense. "Put it right there." He pointed out a spot on the wall.

Anamull stepped forward with a box that was open on the bottom and top and looked as if it were made of pure white ivory.

D-Caf knew the wall was worrying Yago. Yago didn't dare step outside. He made no secret of the fact that he didn't trust Anamull or D-Caf to pull him back in. But Yago wasn't willing to give up contact with — and power over — the aliens.

Yago turned his golden catlike gaze on D-Caf. "This better work."

D-Caf felt his mouth go dry. He didn't want to make Yago angry. No. D-Caf liked life, even though it had gone deeply strange lately, and he wanted to go on living. Upsetting Yago was not the way to make that happen. Yago was becoming more unpredictable, his anger more wild. D-Caf was pretty sure that Yago was sick. Sick — as in, stark raving mad.

Note to self, D-Caf thought. Keep mouth shut.

It was too late for that. After the meeting the night before, he'd gotten tired of Yago boo-hooing and wringing his hands about how the wall was going to ruin all of his plans. Yago wasn't grasping the obvious so D-Caf had pointed it out. Billy wouldn't create a wall that stopped them from getting out of *Billyville*.

Yago had been thrilled.

But when they were alone, Anamull had gotten right up under D-Caf's nose. Close enough so that D-Caf got a whiff of sweet rancid sweat.

"I'm sick of those crazy Meanies," Anamull had growled. "Remember this next time you're tempted to be helpful." He'd landed a swift punch in D-Caf's stomach. Breathing had been a challenge for a good ten minutes.

D-Caf's ribs still hurt.

Now he watched nervously as Anamull pushed the box into the wall. It was easy to imagine what was happening on the other, solid side: A square-shaped hole was probably appearing.

"That's far enough," D-Caf called. "As long as it sticks halfway through, the hole should stay open."

Anamull showed him his fist.

D-Caf sealed his mouth. What was he doing hanging out with an egomaniacal pretty-boy and his pet thug? True, he didn't have a lot of choices, what with only a dozen or so humans surviving.

He didn't expect to be welcomed in by Jobs and Mo'Steel and Violet and Noyze. They were too normal, too moral to accept him in their midst. Jobs and his crowd had long memories. They still remember what he'd accidentally done five hundred years ago.

It was unfair.

The Meanies noticed the opening in the wall and the weirdness began. They immediately gathered around, vying to be the first to push their tentacles through the box and receive Yago's touch.

D-Caf tried not to watch. But it was like a pileup on the expressway. Impossible to resist.

The first, pushiest Meanie pulled one of his tentacles free from his blue-black suit. Yago reached out and placed his hand on the Meanie's tentacle.

Yago removed his hand and the Meanie collapsed, only to be pushed aside by the next one in line. Patiently, Yago worked through the entire group. Then he called the leader, Yago's Buff Biceps, back to the box.

"Report," Yago said tersely.

Words began to scroll across the screen on the front of Yago's Buff Biceps's suit.

D-Caf's attention wandered. He studied a grass-green scratch down the right side of the Meanie's suit. How had he gotten that? In battle? In battle with what — a park bench?

D-Caf snorted, then shot a quick, guilty look at Yago. Yago didn't approve of levity when the Meanies were around. Or ever, really. But Yago hadn't noticed his transgression. He was fixated on the Meanie's little screen and his face was glowing.

Uh-oh.

D-Caf looked at Anamull, but he was deeply interested in digging something out of his nose. No help there.

Anamull finally pulled the box free, and the ordeal was over. The Meanies went off to do whatever and Yago turned his attention back to D-Caf and Anamull.

"A raiding party of Meanies is going to attack the Zone!" Yago said, jubilant. "They want to test our defenses."

This was cause for celebration? D-Caf didn't get it. "Shouldn't we warn everyone?" he asked.

"And let 2Face pat me on the head and say, 'Good Yago,' while she gets credit for repelling the enemy? No," Yago said. "It's only a raid. Let it come and let 2Face fail to protect us. Only then will all of the Remnants see that I am the true power among them and their only salvation."

Anamull nodded, and then they were all trooping back to Yago's temple that they called home. The others didn't seem to notice D-Caf hadn't agreed. Or maybe they just didn't care.

CHAPTER 8

"DO YOU THINK HE'S ONE OF THE MISSING?"

"Enough death," Noyze said. "That's the way I feel. Some of the Meanies must feel the same way,"

"How do you know how they feel?" Jobs asked. His face was haggard. Drawn. Mo'Steel didn't remember ever seeing his best friend look so bad. Not even when they found his parents hadn't made it. What was he so afraid of? Making it to Earth — or not making it?

The three of them were sitting in the nameless, fast-food place that was a strange combination of McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, and Taco Bell. Cups of soda sat sweating on the table in front of them. The tabletop was lemon-yellow. Cheerful.

Only Mo'Steel didn't feel cheerful. Having Jobs and Noyze together in the same room gave him a strong desire to nibble the skin around his fingernails. He wanted them to get along. And they weren't. Not especially.

"Sure, the Meanies look like ponies in Darth Vader suits," Noyze was saying. "But I lived with them. I understand their language. I know how their minds work. They have culture. Government. Religion —"

"Actually, a couple of religions now," Mo'Steel said. "Thanks to the Yago-meister."

"The point is they're not just killing machines." Noyze's dark eyes glittered with conviction. She was the type to get worked up. A do-gooder. Mo'Steel liked that. He also thought she was pretty cool.

"We discussed this at the meeting," Jobs said wearily.

"I'm not inclined to follow 2Face's orders," Noyze said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that if I want to talk to the Meanies, 2Face can't stop me," Noyze said.

"It's pointless," Jobs said flatly. "Even if you make an agreement, 2Face will never honor it." Mo'Steel found himself wondering when Jobs had slept last.

"She won't have to," Noyze argued. "As I understand it, we're building a defensive camp here. If I can stop the Meanies from attacking, there's no war."

"You seem to have this all figured out," Jobs said with a sigh. "What exactly are you going to do?"

"I think it's best if I don't tell you that," Noyze said.

"Okay. What are you planning to give them?" Jobs persisted.

"I'd really rather not say," Noyze told him.

The conversation went on like that. Circling around and around, chasing its own tail, until Noyze suddenly stood up and announced that she had to go.

"Dr. Cohen is waiting for me," Noyze said. Then she put a soft hand on Mo'Steel's shoulder and squeezed. "I'll see *you* later."

Jobs watched Noyze go, then turned his exhausted gaze on Mo'Steel. "Wacky girl. You like her, huh?"

"Yeah. Besides, constantly flirting with death brings out the romantic in me," Mo'Steel said, batting his eyes and laughing.

"Sometimes I wish — maybe we should have just stayed here in the Zone," Jobs said suddenly. "Let the Meanies take Mother wherever. After a few generations we would probably have stumbled across a suitable planet."

Mo'Steel laughed again. "Noyze and I hang out a few times and you're talking about the next generation?" That's when he caught a flash of movement outside the restaurant's plate-glass window. Kubrick. Running down the street. Then Violet. Running the same way. And then Roger Dodger, followed closely by Tamara and Tate. He could hear distant shouts.

Was this it? Mo'Steel's pulse picked up. Were the Meanies attacking? He jumped to his feet. "Something's definitely happening!"

Jobs and Mo'Steel rushed outside, saw the others huddled in front of the wall where it intersected Big Bill Boulevard, and ran to join them. Violet and Kubrick were arguing.

"We've got to let him in!"

"Wait! Just wait. We've got to think first." Who were they letting in? Meanies? Mo'Steel peered over Roger Dodger's shoulder. Not Meanies. A man.

A stranger stood on the other side of the wall. He didn't seem to be aware of them watching him. Mo'Steel scanned his memory. He didn't remember seeing this guy on the shuttle but that proved exactly nothing. There'd been so many people, so much confusion. The guy must have come off the shuttle. Where *else* would he have come from?

Mo'Steel and the others all watched as the man ran his fingers over the outside of the wall, apparently searching for an opening. He was tall, too thin. His lips were cracked and bleeding, the corners caked with white gook. He had faded red hair that was dirty enough to clump, and pale, freckled skin that was sunburned and peeling. Mo'Steel could have counted the ribs showing under his filthy and ripped pinkish T-shirt.

"We've got to let him in," Violet said again.

"What if he's sick?" Kubrick asked. "He sure looks sick."

Mo'Steel suddenly noticed his mother had appeared from somewhere. Olga's gaze was thoughtful. "Do you think he's one of the missing?" she asked.

Mo'Steel thought back to their first hours on Mother. They'd all been terrified, confused. He remembered how thirsty he'd been. How his head had throbbed after being on ice for so long. Nobody had understood where they were or how they'd gotten there. Even now, the events of those first few hours were hazy in Mo'Steel's mind.

But one thing was impossible to forget: The worms had attacked and they'd bunnied out, abandoning some of the others on the shuttle. Kubrick, his father, and three more people still in their hibernation berths. Another eight mysteriously disappeared before the worms attacked.

They'd reconnected with Kubrick and his dad almost immediately. Noyze and Dr. Cohen had reappeared during their first all-out battle with the Meanies. Then, much more recently, they'd met Amelia, a deeply freaky woman who claimed to have two human companions. Maybe she did. Maybe she didn't. Assuming she was a liar, eight humans were still missing. Six if she was on the up-and-up.

"Could be a group hallucination," Tate said.

Tamara stepped close to the man. Got as close as she could get without penetrating the wall and studied him suspiciously.

"Could be a tool of the Meanies," she said. "I suggest leaving him right where he is. Or" — Tamara's voice dropped to a whisper — "he, he could be another Shipwright in disguise." She fingered the old-fashioned pistol that was tucked into her belt.

"Tamara, relax," Jobs said.

Tate put a restraining hand on Tamara's arm.

Olga gasped. "Oh, God, what if he's Angelique's husband? Does anyone know where she is? Roger Dodger, go look for Dr. Cohen."

Mo'Steel saw Roger Dodger nod. The kid ran off toward the house Dr. Cohen shared with Noyze. Dr Cohen clung to the doubtful hope that one of the missing was her husband. Mo'Steel had always hoped she was right.

"This is a major security risk," Tamara muttered, "A stranger appears just as we're about to go to war? Too convenient. I don't like it."

"Tamara, don't do anything rash," Olga said. "That could be Angelique's husband out there."

"I don't like it one bit." Tamara said.

Mo'Steel saw the man's eyes roll back in his head. Foam bubbled out of his mouth and he began to pass out. For a moment, Mo'Steel had the crazy idea Tamara's gaze was the cause of the man's distress. But that was ridiculous. The man couldn't see Tamara. Couldn't see any of them. His knees buckled and he slumped forward against the wall and slid to the ground.

"I don't care who he is, he needs medical care." Olga surprised Mo'Steel by stepping through the wall.

"Olga — no!" Tamara yelled.

But Olga couldn't hear her now. She crouched, put an arm around the man's shoulders, and tried pulled him more or less to his feet. Mo'Steel and Violet reached out to pull Olga back inside. Tamara glared, but what was Mo'Steel going to do — abandon his mother? Not likely.

Olga gently lowered the man to the ground. "Alan? Are you Dr. Alan Carrington?"

A weak voice croaked in reply. "Name's Charles Langlow the Third. Call me Charlie."

CHAPTER 9

"WE'LL CALL YOU IF WE NEED THE LAWN MOWED."

"Think we should head back?" Noyze asked. "Find out what's going on?"

Dr. Cohen squinted into the middle distance and didn't answer right away. The two of them were standing on a slight grassy hill looking back at the Zone. From here, within the Rider environment, all they could see of the humans' settlement was the imposing metallic wall stretching from ground to sky.

Noyze had spotted the mysterious man five minutes earlier when he'd first wandered up to the wall. They'd been racing to help him when someone — Olga maybe, it looked like Olga from a distance — dragged him into the Zone.

"Maybe we should head back," Noyze said. "In case he needs a doctor."

Dr. Cohen's expression was pained. "I go back now, that's it. I won't have the nerve to walk through that wall again."

"You go back," Noyze said stoutly. "I can find the Meanies myself."

"No," Dr. Cohen said. "I'm not letting you wander around these swamps alone. If you want to go Meanie hunting, I'm coming with you. That's not negotiable."

Noyze shifted the weight of the small knapsack she was carrying and considered the situation. Dr. Cohen wouldn't be able to help someone who was seriously ill. They'd discussed that reality many times. Billy had been able to reproduce only the most basic medicines, using crude formulas stored on the shuttle. Besides, Dr. Cohen was a Ph.D., not an M.D. She'd spent her time back on Earth huddled over a microscope, not seeing patients.

If the mysterious man was seriously ill, Dr. Cohen wouldn't be able to help him. And if he wasn't seriously ill, the others could handle it just as well. "Let's go on," Noyze said. Dr. Cohen nodded grimly. They turned their backs to the wall and began to walk. Noyze hoped they were heading toward Meanie territory.

* * *

Mo'Steel had Charlie's feet. Kubrick and Jobs each took an arm. They stumbled down the too-perfect sidewalk toward Dr. Cohen's seldom-used office, carrying him as gently as possible. He didn't weigh much, but since he'd passed out again he was deadweight "Where do you think he's been?" Violet asked. She was walking in the curb, hurrying to keep pace with them.

"Somewhere extremely woolly," Mo'Steel said.

Tate and Tamara had already peeled off from the group and headed home to do who knows what. Maybe they wanted to e-mail Billy and 2Face. Tamara had made no secret of her opinion they'd made a grave error bringing Charlie within the wall.

Mo'Steel didn't agree. He welcomed the opportunity to help one of the people they'd unceremoniously left on the shuttle. Unfortunately, it looked as if the good deed was coming a little late for Charlie.

Charlie's bony body made Mo'Steel think of autumn leaves, snakeskins, ancient cedar shingles. He was more of a husk than a man.

Olga ran ahead, opened the office door. The lights were out, the spare rooms hushed. "Angelique!" she called.

No answer.

"Come on," Olga muttered. "Where is she hiding?"

The boys grunted and groaned as they put Charlie down on the exam table. He lay there, his limbs akimbo, face muscles slack. His breathing was shallow.

"Now what?" Jobs mumbled. Roger Dodger came pounding in, breathing hard. Edward was trailing along behind him, attracted by the excitement.

"I can't find Dr. Cohen anywhere," Roger Dodger announced importantly. "I looked at her house and in all the stores."

"Did you ask Noyze?" Mo'Steel asked. "Noyze would know where she was."

"I asked everyone I saw," Roger Dodger insisted. "Nobody knows where she is."

"Now what?" Mo'Steel directed the question at his mother, who was looking sadly down at Charlie. Olga sighed. "We'll give him some of my secret cure and hope Angelique turns up soon. I'll go get the stuff. Watch him." She moved around the table and headed toward the door.

"What's her secret cure?" Jobs asked Mo'Steel, "Tea with a shot of Tabasco," Mo'Steel said. "Works great on the flu."

"Billy made you guys Tabasco sauce?" Jobs asked.

"He wouldn't refuse us the necessities of life," Mo'Steel replied with a grin.

"Maybe we should give him a bath," Violet suggested. "Or at least sponge him down a little."

Mo'Steel saw Jobs take an involuntary step away from the table. Kubrick gave Violet a pained frown.

The femme had a point. A good one. Charlie was pretty rank. It hadn't been so noticeable outside, but now that they were inside ... Well.

"Think the smell was what made him pass out?" Jobs asked.

"It's enough to make me hurl," Edward said.

Violet sighed and started to roll up her sleeves. "Why don't you guys take off? Olga and I can handle this. We'll call you if we need the lawn mowed or a spider squished."

Mo'Steel resented Violet's attitude, he really did. He could nurture and talk about his feelings and even give sponge baths. Still, he didn't allow his resentment to stop him from heading out the door.

CHAPTER 10

"ARE YOU TELLING ME THIS GUY USED TO WEAR A TINFOIL HAT?"

Billy blinked.

That was all the encouragement 2Face needed. She tossed down the fléchette gun she'd been playing with, sat up on the couch, and leaned forward eagerly. "What is it?"

"Interesting correspondence from Tamara."

Billy sat in a comfy, oversized armchair, staring straight ahead. His posture and the blank expression on his face reminded 2Face of the way her father used to look watching TV.

Only there was no TV. Billy's eyes were gazing at nothing as his brain scanned some unknowable internal landscape. He didn't require a screen or keyboard or wires to receive e-mail from the humans down in the Zone. As soon as they typed words into their computers and pressed `SEND`, the message entered Mother and that was the same thing as entering Billy's brain. The interface between the two was invisible, seamless, meaningless. 2Face didn't believe they could be separated.

That meant 2Face could only learn what Billy felt like sharing with her. She'd gotten very good at reading his facial expressions. There was little else for her to do.

Now she sat back and sighed impatiently. A message from Tamara wasn't exactly exciting news. Tamara was turning into a bit of a crank. She sent Billy eight, ten messages a day. She complained about the weapons; she questioned the mechanics of the wall; she whined; she complained. 2Face didn't know why Billy bothered to read the endless stream of ungrammatical ramblings.

Was it possible he didn't have a choice?

"What's she want now?" 2Face asked wearily.

"A man has appeared in the Zone," Billy said.

"Wh — what? A man *in* the Zone? How did he get *in* the Zone? I thought the wall —"

"The wall is working fine," Billy said serenely. "Olga and some of the others let him in."

"Who?" 2Face swung her feet to the ground, ready for action. Olga couldn't just do whatever she wanted; they were at war. 2Face would have to talk to her. Then she had another thought. "What man? Where did he come from?"

"I don't know," Billy said.

"*You don't know?*" 2Face repeated. "I thought you were monitoring the entire ship."

"I am," Billy said. "But not every part of the ship at all times."

"Still!" 2Face insisted, feeling a nervous chill in her stomach, "you should have seen him at least once. Do you think he came out of the Dark Zone?" The Dark Zone — that's what they called the area of the basement where Amelia hung out. Somehow she shielded the area from Billy's view, creating a serious hole in their defenses. 2Face hadn't been able to think of a way to fill it. Jobs and Mo'Steel claimed Amelia had some formidable powers of her own. 2Face had quizzed Jobs and Mo'Steel about their encounter with her until they were clearly out of patience. "I don't know," Billy said.

2Face was hopping with impatience. This was weird. This was dangerous. It made her furious that Billy was so calm. He actually had a little smile on his face. Maddening. She hated how he always knew everything before she did. He would tell her, of course, but he wasn't good at narrating. She'd have to drag every last detail out of him.

"Is he from the *Mayflower*?"

"Yes."

"How do you know? Do you remember him? Did you meet him?"

"In a way."

"In a way?" 2Face sounded shrill, even to herself. "You either met him or you didn't. Which is it?"

"I didn't meet him face-to-face. I'm pretty sure I read his thoughts." Billy smiled tentatively. "Of course, in his thoughts, he looks rather different."

2Face stared at Billy, trying to make sense of this. "You read his thoughts? When? On the shuttle?"

Billy met her gaze. The expression in his eyes was gentle, imploring, touched by guilt. "Yes," he said softly. "I *was* awake for five hundred years."

2Face had heard this before but now she stopped to think about what it really meant. Not easy. Five hundred years was too much time to comprehend. Six, seven, eight lifetimes without ever blinking your eyelids or sleeping. The longest prison sentence a human had ever endured.

"So you amused yourself by reading other people's thoughts?" 2Face asked, her tone harsher than she intended. Billy had never told her about his reading their thoughts and now it wasn't hard for 2Face to understand why. She felt vulnerable and ashamed.

2Face thought back, trying to recall what memories would have been in her mind to amuse Billy before they ever landed here. Memories of — what? Swimming competitions, seeing her mother and father argue during Christmas dinner when she was five years old, the disgust she felt when she'd first looked at the burns on her face in the mirror — what else? Something shameful was floating on the edge of her consciousness, but she couldn't quite grasp it.

"I think I did," Billy said softly. "My memories of the shuttle are hazy. I remember *thinking* I was reading people's memories. Maybe I was. Or maybe I was making up stories in my head."

2Face had the sudden impression Billy was entirely with her in that room, that he had switched off the parts of his brain that were usually busily focused on scanning the ship, running the environments, and performing myriad other tasks. His attention made her wary. What was so important about this conversation? Was it the mysterious man? Or something else?

"The man is Charlie Langlow," Billy said. "He's paranoid."

"Paranoid about what?" 2Face demanded.

"He's a paranoid schizophrenic," Billy said. "He was medicated and effectively cured back on Earth. But I — I *think* I saw his memories of how he behaved before he was diagnosed."

"And we're dealing with the unmedicated Charlie," 2Face said. "No high-tech drugs in space."

"Yes."

2Face's emotions were scrambled. She didn't know whether to feel aggravated with Olga for introducing this threat or glad to have something new to think about. For all her talk of making preparations for war, there was precious little for her to do. And another part of her mind was cataloging the embarrassing things Billy probably now knew about her 2Face forced the thought away. Too unsettling.

"How'd he get on the shuttle?" 2Face asked. "Why was he selected?"

"He was a reporter, a journalist," Billy said. "Ran Web sites devoted to conspiracy theories."

"Huh?" 2Face was having a hard time following the conversation about Charlie. She kept thinking about Billy reading her memories. The fire. If Billy had read her thoughts, he'd know all about the fire.

"He particularly liked the thoughts about hostile aliens beaming microwaves at Earth," Billy said.

"Are you telling me this guy used to wear a tinfoil hat?" 2Face asked.

"Well, he was right about the hostile aliens," Billy said and laughed a little.

"I don't get it," 2Face said.

"He knew about the *Mayflower*," Billy said. "He threatened to tell the world."

"Just like my dad," 2Face muttered. "He was a reporter for CBS News in Miami. Or — did you know that already?"

Billy looked at her sadly.

"Did you know my father blackmailed NASA?" 2Face asked, her voice rising. "His silence bought us three berths on that ship. Not news to you, right?"

"Please," Billy said. "Please don't be upset. I — I may have imagined the whole thing about reading thoughts."

"There were eighty people on that shuttle," 2Face said. "Seventy-nine people other than you. Did you — did you read everyone's thoughts? Or just some of us? What about me?"

"2Face, please."

"I have a right to know! Tell me, do you know how I burned my face?!"

* * *

"Tell me!" 2Face insisted. Her mind was like a ride at an amusement park. Round and round it went. She wanted to know if he knew about the fire, about how it started.

He knew.

But he didn't care.

All he wanted was to calm 2Face down, to have her come sit beside him on the couch.

But what were the right words? What could he say to calm her mind and make things okay between them again?

"None of us are perfect," Billy said.

"You don't need to read minds to know that," 2Face said contemptuously. "You've been here while we were attacked by Meanies, Squids, Shipwrights, and one another. You know I can be ruthless. That's no secret. But I want to know if you know about my life before we got here. So — tell me about the fire."

Billy saw flames. He heard shouts, the firemen running, their axes splintering the bedroom door, whimpers, a yellow lighter. He felt raw anger and closed his eyes. He couldn't tell 2Face about the fire. Those images would never soothe anyone.

2Face looked away. She dug her running shoes out from under the couch and began lacing them up.

"Where are you going?" Billy's heart was gripped by fear.

"Down to the Zone," 2Face said. "I want to meet this Charlie person and find out where he came from all of a sudden,"

"Are you coming back?" Billy asked.

"I —" 2Face didn't raise her gaze from her shoes. Billy could sense her raw pain. Her anger. Fear. He held his breath as he waited for her next words. "I — yes," 2Face said flatly. "I'll be back."

CHAPTER 11

"BEST SNOW JOB IN HISTORY."

"The whole point, see, was to give us up to the aliens, man." Charlie looked around the room and nodded sagely. "That was the whole point. We have to get back to Earth, it's still there, still intact."

Violet sat back, listening without commenting. She was tired. She and Olga had spent the entire night nursing Charlie: cutting off his filthy clothes, bathing him, slipping him into a pair of Burroway's soft pajamas, coaxing him to sip tiny spoonfuls of the spicy tea Olga had made. Violet had done it willingly, as a penitence. She'd taken it as a good sign when Charlie regained consciousness around dawn.

Now, she wasn't so sure.

"Who wanted to give us up to the aliens?" 2Face asked.

"The government, sister, who else?" Charlie answered. "You think they're just about picking up the trash and running schools? Not a chance, not... a ... chance."

Olga had gone home hours ago. But 2Face, Kubrick, Jobs, and Mo'Steel had hung in. They were fascinated just to have someone new to talk to.

Even if he was a little nuts.

Occasionally, Jobs, Mo'Steel, or Kubrick would throw in a question. But for the most part it was 2Face who kept Charlie talking — talking long beyond the point where Violet had lost interest.

"I saw the planet break up," Jobs said quietly.

Charlie turned his faded blue eyes to Jobs and matched his quiet tone. "And *I* saw pictures of Neil-frigging-Armstrong walking on the moon."

"So?" 2Face asked.

"Never happened, sister, never," Charlie said. "Those pictures were taken in a Hollywood studio. Special effects to fool the Russians. Worked, too! We make them think we beat them to the moon and twenty years later Communism was dead. Best snow job in history."

"I saw—"

"A movie for your benefit, kid," Charlie interrupted. He paused to sip at his tea, grimacing at the strange flavor. "When we get back to Earth, you'll see. The old planet will be as good as new. Bet they'll be surprised to see us conning." He chuckled gleefully.

"Five hundred years have passed," 2Face pointed out. "Even if there was some sort of— plot against us, all of the conspirators would be dead now."

"That's true," Charlie said. Then his eyebrow rose — he had only one, a peach-colored mono-brow that covered both eyes — and he added, "But how do we *know* five hundred years have passed?"

Violet had heard enough. She stood, stretched, headed for the door. "I'm going to get some rest."

Jobs caught her eye and quietly followed her outside. "You okay?" he asked once they were alone.

"I'm —tired." Violet could see concern in Jobs's expression and it worried her. Why was he concerned? Did he know? No. Roger Dodger had promised her he wouldn't tell and she believed him. She *had* to. "Charlie has enough of an audience without me," she added.

"You buying his act?" Jobs asked.

Violet laughed. "His *act*? I guess your feelings are clear. But the answer is, no. In my opinion, his paranoia routine belongs in a cheap movie."

"At least he's happy we're heading home — back to Earth," Jobs said. "We're already dealing with enough people who want to destroy us for that decision."

"You're thinking about Amelia?" Violet asked.

"She warned us not to change course," Jobs said. "I keep expecting her to retaliate."

Jobs had told Violet in great detail about his terrifying encounter with Amelia. Violet was most interested in his description of Amelia transforming herself into a mass of putrefaction, of worms and bacteria, and goo caustic enough to kill a Meanie. Amelia had also said the others were becoming more like her. That interested Violet, too.

"What do you think Charlie's up to?" Jobs asked.

"You want my conspiracy theory on the conspiracy theorist?" Violet didn't mean to sound snide, but she was anxious to get away. To get back to her home.

"Yeah. If you don't mind."

"I'll have to sleep on that."

2Face was too busy to send Kubrick an e-mail. Too busy to join him for a meal. Too busy, apparently, to even acknowledge his presence in this room.

But she had time for Charlie.

Time to ask questions, questions, questions and encourage him to spin his ridiculous theories.

It was making Kubrick angry.

"Where have you been?" 2Face was asking now. Kubrick leaned against the door frame, not bothering to hide his disgust.

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked suspiciously as Jobs slipped quietly back into the room.

"Since you woke up on the shuttle," 2Face said. "Where have you been? Do you know where you are?"

"On some weird planet," Charlie said immediately. "All weird trees and swamps and orange oceans and rolling hills. I've been walking for days."

"Seen any aliens?" 2Face asked.

"No, but they exist, man." Charlie glanced nervously over his left shoulder and then his right. Kubrick snorted. What was Charlie expecting? A little green Martian to jump him from behind? "Trust me, they're here somewhere."

"Where do you think you are now?" 2Face asked.

"On the shuttle," Charlie said promptly. "Where else could we be but the shuttle? In sick bay."

His eyes narrowed as he studied 2Face's face. "Hey, where were you guys before? I was pretty creeped out, waking up and being all alone and everything. You guys weren't playing some sort of trick on me, were you? Laughing behind my back maybe?"

"No."

Charlie gave his tea a suspicious look and set it on the table. "Where did this come from? We didn't have any tea on the shuttle. Are you guys poisoning me? Truth serum maybe? Or, or, maybe we are already back on Earth! if we ever left. Where are we? Langley maybe? Lubyanka?"

Finally, even 2Face had heard enough. Kubrick watched with some irritation as she stood up and motioned for the others to follow her. "Charlie, get some rest. Recuperate."

They trooped out into the hallway, leaving Charlie calling after them. "I'm really not tired. Doesn't anyone want to stay and talk? No? What's the problem? Can't take the truth?"

"Kubrick, please keep an eye on him," 2Face said. "I don't trust this guy." She moved to leave.

Kubrick grabbed her arm, stopping her. "You're getting pretty good at snapping out orders, 2Face. Why don't *you* watch him? Too busy running back to your new buddy, Billy?"

"Hey — back off," Mo'Steel said. Jobs stood next to him, looking queasy.

2Face waved him away impatiently. "I can take care of myself. Why don't you guys take off?"

Jobs slowly moved toward the door and went outside. Mo'Steel followed reluctantly, casting long uneasy glances back at Kubrick.

"Give it a rest," 2Face told Kubrick when they were alone. "I'm just doing what I have to do."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"Whatever Billy needs me to do to get us ready to fight," 2Face said.

"You know what you are?" Kubrick asked. "Totally power hungry. You never had any interest in Billy before Mother chose him to run this looney bin."

"Are you finished?"

"You don't belong up there with that — that automaton."

"Oh? Where do I belong?"

"Isn't it obvious? You're the one who enjoys looking in the mirror so much. Don't you pay any attention to what you see?"

2Face angrily shook her arm free. "So all of the freaks should stick together? Is that it?"

"That's it exactly," Kubrick said. "I can look at your face without cringing and, don't fool yourself, I'm the only one around here who can."

2Face laughed coldly. "In other words: I'm ugly, you're ugly, let's be ugly together. No chance."

CHAPTER 12

"WHAT DID YOU SEE?"

Noyze felt good. Putting some space between her and the Zone let her breathe easier. "I wouldn't mind building a house and living out here," she told Dr Cohen. They were taking a water break, standing on yet another of the endless Rider hills and gazing out at the copper-colored sea.

"A summer home?" Dr. Cohen asked with a wry smile.

Noyze shivered as a cool breeze hit her sweaty clothes. Slogging through the swampy grassland was hard work. Her hands were nicked, her neck muscles stiff. Inside her soggy shoes, blisters were forming on both heels.

"I was thinking of full-time," Noyze admitted. "Once you get used to the strange colors, the landscape is quite beautiful."

Dr. Cohen studied her with concern. "You don't strike me as the hermit type."

Noyze sighed and stowed the water bottle. "I was just thinking it would be nice not to rely on Billy for everything. He gives us food, shelter. We don't have to work or go to school. Billy even takes out the trash."

"You need more meaning in life," Dr Cohen said.

"I'm just bored," Noyze said with a self-conscious smile.

Dr Cohen didn't return the smile. She started down the hill, letting Noyze's words hang in the air. When she finally broke the silence, she sounded thoughtful.

"Maybe you should think of improving the community we have instead of abandoning it," Dr Cohen said, pushing aside the tall grasses that surrounded them. "Why not start a school in the Zone? Edward and Roger Dodger definitely need some help staying out of trouble."

"Not to mention Burroway," Noyze said.

"Burroway definitely needs something to do!"

Noyze looked up to laugh with Dr. Cohen.

Four Meanies stood in their path, fléchette guns drawn. Dr Cohen had seen them, too. Noyze saw her back tighten and she stepped back, landing on Noyze's foot. Noyze spun around. More Meanies behind. They were surrounded.

"Put your hands where they can see them," Dr. Cohen advised.

Noyze raised her hands. She smiled at the Meanie directly in front of them. Looking down the barrel of his gun was unnerving. "We — we've come to talk about peace," she said. "We want to avoid a war."

No reaction from the Meanie. But Noyze caught a flicker of tentacles out of the corner of her eye. She turned too late to catch what he was saying. Her Meanie language skills were starting to get rusty.

"We're unarmed," Dr Cohen put in nervously. She lowered her voice and asked Noyze, "Why don't they put their weapons down?"

Noyze was still trying to follow the Meanies' tentacles. She wasn't quite sure of what they were saying, but she sensed they were unsure of what to do. "I wonder if these are Yago's Meanies or part of the main group," she said quietly. "It would be a waste to make a peace treaty with Yago's followers."

"Forget the peace treaty," Dr Cohen said tensely. "I'm just hoping these guys aren't talking about killing us."

* * *

Was it a trap? Five Jutting Knolls wondered. The humans' behavior was odd. Beyond odd: Inexplicable. Perhaps, just perhaps. Mother was answering the Children's prayers. The Children had needed a break ever since Three Glowing Moons and his band of half-wits stole the latest crop of buds — a breathtaking sacrilege! — and seriously set back their schedule. They should have built their army and killed the small band of humans by now. Each cycle of delay meant they were farther off course.

"This can only be a gift from Mother," Two Resting Places waved. The infiltration of Mother had done little to shake his faith.

"Speak in code," Five Jutting Knolls ordered. "Surely you don't believe these humans can understand our sacred speech," Two Resting Places signed — still not in code.

"The Quorum believes it," Five Jutting Knolls said shortly. Frankly, he doubted it, but orders were orders. "That is good enough for me and it had better be good enough for you."

"Finding these strange wandering humans is a gift," Twelve Prevalent Virtues said. "It will save us a bloody, dangerous raid. We can get the data we need right here, right now."

Five Jutting Knolls was still cautious. Finding these wandering humans seemed too lucky to him! The small, dark one was waving her peaceful intent rather too eagerly. And yet the possibility of retrieving the data here could not be passed by.

"Seize the larger one," he signed. "She looks weaker."

Twelve Prevalent Virtues moved forward and wrapped a tentacle around the larger one's neck. She made a sound like "Stop — ahhhhh!"

The Quorum said the humans regularly communicated with sound and it seemed to be true because now the small, dark one was responding to the other's noises by making a hideously high-pitched noise, running forward and hitting Twelve Prevalent Virtues.

Five Jutting Knolls grabbed the small, dark one and quieted her with an energy burst. The high-pitched noise stopped.

"Where should I put the probe?" Two Resting Places asked.

"Near the eyes," Five Jutting Knolls said.

Two Resting Places put the probe on the human's head. Her limbs sagged.

"She's gone to sleep," Twelve Prevalent Virtues said.

"Wake her!" Two Resting Places said. "She has to be awake for the reading."

Twelve Prevalent Virtues shook the human until she began to make low noises. "Mmmmm ... stop, please stop ... we only want peace."

The small, dark one made no noises. The energy burst was working well.

Two Resting Places quickly attached one end of the probe to the human and the other to Five Jutting Knolls's suit. The memories began to flow immediately, before Five Jutting Knolls was ready. He began to tell Two Resting Places to remove the probe but then he was drawn in and it was too late.

Light.

A beautiful golden light framing a human face hovering above. More human faces, fuzzy at first and then growing distinct. Sounds. Scores of the strange sounds that were so important to the humans. Small humans moving in a slow circle, chanting nonsense. The low, rumbling sound of a small animal with hideous soft fur. The wind moving through rigid oversized trees.

Part of Five Jutting Knolls's mind experienced the raw memories as this human did. Another part processed the information, used it to learn more about these hateful and destructive animals that had invaded the Children's home and tried to massacre them. The memories were jumbled, only roughly arranged in the order lived. Five Jutting Knolls hurried through the early stuff, trying to get to something useful.

The humans' world — so odd and lovely. Resolutely geometric dwellings stretching up against a blue sky. Gray clouds swirling and changing. Moisture falling from the sky. Fruit growing on low vines and ripening in the sun. Humans wearing suits in a breathtaking array of colors, flying in machines many times their size.

A haze of poor-quality memories: the face of the same human man thousands and thousands times over, changing ever so slightly, a room filled with tubes and bottles and machines, a box with moving images inside. Five Jutting Knolls didn't bother to interpret these particular memories. He could tell from the indistinct colors that they weren't important even to the human.

He knew her name now. Angelique Cohen. He knew lots of details he'd picked up along with her memories. Born Mendoza, in Argentina, 1980. Moved to Cleveland, Ohio, 1998. Social Security number 056-12-7865. Link number 432-818-290-5656. Married Dr Alan Carrington, 2008.

Ah. A flash of brightly colored memories. Important things. Recent things. Five Jutting Knolls slowed down. Dr. Alan Carrington sitting in a red plastic chair, leaning forward, whispering that the humans' world was about to be crushed. Angelique Cohen's first view of the flying machine currently stored in Node 43. The humans hiding from Children wearing their marvelous cutting wings. The human called Jobs telling the others how the one called Billy killed the Shipwright. The humans preparing for war.

Yes. This was what he was looking for. Preparations for war. Meetings. Communications. These memories should contain everything the Children needed to know. Five Jutting Knolls didn't bother to interpret them now. He simply absorbed them, storing them for later. Later he would go over them in detail and extract every useful bit of information.

He was finished. He had what he needed. He had stored as many memories as his mind would hold. Time to go.

Only ... only he was curious about Angelique Cohen's memory of the Shipwright's death. How had the ridiculous humans managed to take down such a powerful foe? Knowing that could prove useful in the battles to come.

Five Jutting Knolls turned back to that memory. He watched it slowly, absorbing every detail. The human called Jobs standing in the middle of a circle. The other humans standing near, but not too near, listening.

"And then the Shipwright's skin began to get dark," the one called Jobs said with his mouth. "It seemed to be slowing down, fading away. And then, this was so weird, it looked at Billy and said, 'The ancient enemy.' I don't know what it means —"

Five Jutting Knolls stopped. He tore the probe from his suit and dropped it. "We must go," he waved.

"What about this human?" Two Resting Places asked.

"Leave her! Leave them both."

Two Resting Places let Angelique Cohen slump to the ground. The small, dark one — her name was Noyze and Five Jutting Knolls now knew she truly desired peace — was beginning to squirm slightly as the power surge wore off.

"What did you see?" Twelve Prevalent Virtues asked urgently. "What is wrong?"

"I'm fine," Five Jutting Knolls snapped. "I'm fine, but I must report to the Quorum immediately."

He rose into the air and flew off. The ancient enemy ... The Quorum would not be pleased.

CHAPTER 13

"DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?"

Noyze wiped the tears from her face and crawled toward Dr. Cohen. Her head buzzed. The Meanies had done something to her. Zapped her with what felt like a jolt of electricity, zapped her with something that made her nerve endings tingle and left her thoughts scrambled.

Dr. Cohen — *build a house, start a school.*

Get to Dr Cohen —

Ring around the rosy, a pocket full of —

Dr Cohen. Dr Cohen was the important thing.

The doctor was lying flat on the ground with her head tilted up at a strange angle. Was her neck broken? Her eyes were open, unfocused. A rubbery-looking tube was attached to her head just over her left eyebrow.

Noyze forced herself to concentrate. "Dr. Cohen? Are you okay?"

The doctor blinked slowly. Slow close. Slow open. "Yes. I'm fine."

Noyze licked her lips. They were dry. So was her tongue.

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

"Do you know where you are?" Noyze asked.

"On a peace mission that just failed." Dr. Cohen chuckled and started to sit up.

"Wait!" Noyze said. "I don't think you should — don't move. Your head —"

Dr. Cohen reached up tentatively. Her fingers found the tube and her eyes went wide. Shakily, she began to explore the connection between the tube and her face.

"Wait!" Noyze cried, but by the time she got the word out, Dr. Cohen had pulled the tube free. A perfect circle, the size of a half-dollar, was visible in her forehead.

Dr. Cohen gingerly touched the hole and recoiled. "My god ..."

"Does — does it hurt?" Noyze asked. "No." Dr Cohen's tone was matter-of-fact. Almost amused. "But the risk of infection — we'd better go. Maybe Billy can ..."

Noyze scrambled to her feet and helped Dr. Cohen up. "I'm — I'm sorry. I never should have dragged you out here. This is all my fault. I can't believe the Meanies —"

Tears welled up as she remembered the assault, the feeling of the tentacle tightening around her throat. She stumbled.

Dr. Cohen rested a hand on Noyze's shoulder. "Forget all that. Just help me get back to the Zone."

Noyze nodded. She'd get them back to the Zone. Dr Cohen had to live. The trick was not to look at the hole. Noyze would just pretend the hole was a zit, an unsightly blemish. She'd just pretend it wasn't there.

Colors.

Strange colors.

Beautiful colors.

Strangely beautiful colors.

Angelique struggled to name them but there weren't words. Redblue. But no, that wasn't quite right because there was more blue than red. More like redblueblue. Or redbluebluebl. Yes. That was the right name for the lines radiating out beneath them like a system of veins for the floor. And the lines in the ocean — those were redredredorange. And the ones on the trees ...

Angelique tripped over a root, fell forward onto her hands and knees. Oh, look. The delicate lines of color in the grass were so *exquisite*.

But then Noyze was helping her up and crying and brushing the dirt off. Angelique shut her eyes and concentrated on walking. She had to forget about the colors. She had to get back to the Zone.

Why did she have to get back to the Zone?

Oh, yeah, right, she had a hole in her head.

Wait. It was hard to walk with your eyes closed. She opened her eyes and the colors came rushing back in — redredredorange and redbluebluebl and tanoran and, and ...

Was this how Meanies experienced the world? She could see the lines of energy that made up everything Mother/Billy had created. Lines not in a logical scientific pattern but in beautiful swoops and swirls like brushstrokes in an oil painting.

The Meanies. They were building an army. Dr. Cohen had seen the birthing field in the Meanie's mind. The Meanie called Five Jutting Knolls who loved nothing more than firing his fléchette gun.

I should tell Noyze, Dr Cohen thought. That way she can tell the others in case I don't make it.

But concentrating on Noyze was difficult. She was so plain. Just warm dark skin and drab clothes. No swirling power lines. No colors. No redbluebluebl or tanoran or, or —

CHAPTER 14

"HALF HUMAN. HALF SOMETHING ELSE."

"I need butter," Edward said.

"What's the magic word?" Olga asked.

"Please," Edward said automatically.

Jobs shook his head and smiled as he passed the butter to his brother. The scene was weird. Weird on many levels. Weird that Olga was teaching table manners to a kid who had taken on the coloration of his chair until he was almost invisible. Weird that they were eating "steak" and "spinach soufflé" off fine china when they knew the Meanies could attack any second. Weird that a strangely two-dimensional maid was busy refilling their water glasses.

Violet had organized this dinner to cheer everyone up, but so far it was a gloomy affair.

Mo'Steel was out of sorts because Noyze and Dr. Cohen were AWOL. He'd been the first to notice they were nowhere in the Zone. Everyone knew they must have gone off to talk to the Meanies about peace. Mo'Steel wasn't the type to worry, but Jobs had a feeling Mo'Steel was mad Noyze hadn't told him where she was going.

But they weren't talking about that. "Your centerpiece is beautiful," Olga told Violet. "Thank you," Violet said. "The shuttle's computer contains an unabridged botanical encyclopedia. I had some fun mixing summer and winter blossoms. What do you think, Jobs?"

"I was thinking about the Meanies," Jobs said. "Why do you think they're so opposed to heading toward Earth? Where do they want to go?"

Violet sighed. "I said what do you *think*, not what are you *thinking*!"

"Sorry," Jobs mumbled. "No shop talk," Violet said. "You promised." Jobs looked down at his plate. Trying to relax now was like trying to relax on a plummeting airplane. His mind couldn't let go of the fact that he was facing death. Worries about the Meanies, Amelia, Noyze, Dr Cohen, and this Charlie guy kept popping up and demanding attention.

The silence stretched out until Jobs shifted nervously in his chair. He fished for some piece of inoffensive small talk. Came up empty.

"It's Amelia I don't understand," Olga finally said. "Sorry, Violet. But I just keep thinking she'd welcome a chance to check out Earth. Same as us. She's human, same as us."

"Well, not exactly," Mo'Steel said. "Not anymore. Amelia is more like the X-Men. Half human. Half something else. A mutant."

Olga smiled. "And I thought all that time you spent reading p-comics was a waste."

Violet sighed again and motioned for the maid to remove their plates. They were half full. The food Billy/Mother created was always slightly off. Strangely metallic tasting. Jobs didn't have much of an appetite anyway. He was too keyed up.

"Do you think Mother created Amelia?" Mo'Steel asked. "You know, the way she created Kubrick?"

"I don't think so, no," Jobs said. "Billy couldn't find a file on her. Also, remember when we saw her in the basement? She said she was *evolving*!"

"One person doesn't evolve," Olga said. "A species evolves."

"Jobs told her that," Mo'Steel said. "It was like a tractor-pull for science geeks. Lots of heavy wrestling over terms."

"One person couldn't evolve on Earth," Violet said. She shot Jobs an unhappy look, acknowledging the fact they were now talking shop. "But the same rules don't apply here. I'm not sure any rules apply."

"Don't forget Amelia said she had help from the greatest force in the universe," Jobs said. "Whatever that's supposed to mean."

"Maybe ... the Shipwrights?" Olga suggested.

"You think the Shipwrights are the greatest force in the universe?" Jobs asked doubtfully.

"Certainly stronger than the Riders or the Meanies," Olga said. "Who else is around?"

She said it dismissively and everyone looked surprised when Jobs said, "Two possibilities. Either there's simply some condition aboard this vessel that causes mutations to occur — something that acts a little like radiation, for example, or ..."

"Or what?" Mo'Steel demanded.

Jobs glanced at Edward, but he seemed focused on the slices of blueberry cheesecake the maid was serving. "Or — there's someone else on board Mother. Someone other than the Meanies and Riders and Shipwrights. Some other species or force."

"What do you mean, force?" Edward asked. So he was listening. Great.

Jobs considered dropping it. Edward didn't need to hear this. And Violet had made him promise to forget, or ignore, their worries for one evening.

But he couldn't seem to shut up. This was important. And he couldn't miss the opportunity to talk things over with the only people he still trusted. Besides, now they were all staring at him. Waiting to hear what he had to say. Even Violet.

"I mean a force. Someone or something that lacks the power to act directly, but has the power to manipulate others," Jobs said. "The power to change others, mutate them."

"Why?" Mo'Steel asked.

"Yeah," Violet said impatiently. "Why would anyone want to cause mutations?"

Jobs licked his lips. This was the kind of problem he liked best. The simple act of thinking about it soothed him. "Look at the mutations," he said. "What do we know?"

Edward was listening intently now, cheesecake forgotten. "We know I turned into a chameleon."

"Right," Jobs said. Of course Edward was interested. They were talking about him. "We also know Yago has somehow developed — talents that make the Meanies think he's a god. And Billy has a whole bunch of strange powers —"

"There's also the Baby and Tamara," Olga put in.

"And Amelia," Mo'Steel said. "And Kubrick."

"But it's obvious not all of these changes happened in the same way," Olga said. "Edward has changed gradually, seemingly spontaneously. Painlessly. That supports your environmental hypothesis. But Kubrick was altered by Mother physically. Totally different story."

"True," Jobs said. "Just thinking out loud."

"And didn't you tell me Billy had psychic dreams back on Earth?" Violet asked, her irritation clear in her voice. Jobs could tell she didn't want to be having this conversation. "You said he saw the Blimps and Rider ocean before we ever even got on the shuttle."

"True," Jobs said. "It doesn't add up to a neat sequence of causation."

Mo'Steel raised an eyebrow. "Translation."

"I'm puzzled," Jobs said with a shrug. "It's a straight-up mystery."

"The Baby and Tamara don't fit into any pattern, either," Olga said. "The Baby arrived sometime during our journey. Presumably it was already partly a Shipwright before the shuttle encountered Mother. Another mutant."

"Maybe there is no connection," Jobs said. "It's just — only a handful of people exist here and a good proportion of them have altered or have *been* altered. That may be totally random or it may not. I just think it's worth looking for connections."

"Yago changed the same way I did," Edward said. "I mean, nobody noticed."

A connection clicked inside Jobs's mind and he smiled. "Here's an interesting observation. Yago's and Edward's mutations are similar in another way. They mirror their personalities. Edward is a quiet kid —" Edward was more than quiet; he was practically invisible. Even back on Earth he had made few demands and gotten little attention. "And his mutation heightens that personality trait. Same with Yago."

"He was always the center of the universe in his own mind," Violet said with a strange smile. "And now he's like a pop star walking through a junior-high cafeteria. Only instead of being surrounded by twelve-year-old girls, his fans are aliens."

Jobs nodded. "Amelia might be the same way. We don't know anything about her. It's possible she was — *diseased* back on Earth."

"I still wouldn't call it a mutation," Olga said. "What Amelia can do — turning the bacteria and fungi in her body into a weapon — that's just too far-out. Human DNA can only be twisted so far."

Jobs nodded thoughtfully. "Olga's right. DNA is analog. You can twist it only so many ways. Some person or some force is treating human beings as if they were digital—just so many data bits to be added or subtracted or recombined."

"That's not evolution," Olga said.

"So forget the word *evolution*," Jobs said easily. "Forget the word *mutation*. Call it a redesign or a reimagining. The important thing is to understand what's happening. Someone or something is manipulating at least some of our bodies. And maybe all of them."

"And you're saying these ... these rewrites — these fundamental changes — may reflect some preexisting character trait?" Violet said.

Jobs shrugged. "Sure, maybe, I don't know."

"You're speculating?" Violet demanded.

"Absolutely," Jobs said.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I've had enough speculation for one evening," Violet said, her tone icy.

"Violet —" Jobs started. He was beginning to regret breaking his promise to her. They were all tired and worried. Maybe Violet needed a break more than he realized.

Violet waved him off. "You relax by examining things, trying to explain them. Not everyone is the same way."

"I know," Jobs said quietly.

"Well." Olga stood up and smiled bravely. "Thanks for a lovely evening, Violet. And thank you, Jobs, for a provocative conversation. I'd better be going now."

Violet got up, too. "I think I'll come with you," she said.

Jobs tried to catch Violet's eye, to send her a look that said he was sorry. But Violet was careful not to look in his direction.

CHAPTER 15

"REDREDREDORANGE. DON'T YOU SEE?"

Violet walked with Olga down the sidewalk, heading for the clinic. Old-fashioned gas streetlights lit their way. Fixtures from someone's childhood.

The darkness was entirely fake. It existed only because Billy had set the lights in the Zone to brighten and fade according to a twenty-four-hour cycle.

Somehow Violet's body detected the fraud. Instead of feeling mellow and sleepy like she should after dinner, she was edgy with early-morning energy. Or maybe it was anger making her edgy. Or fear.

"Olga?" Violet said. "I—"

"Shouldn't someone be watching Charlie?" Olga asked. They had just turned onto the Zone's main street. The front of the clinic was clearly visible. Nobody was outside.

"Yes."

They quickened their pace. When they reached the front of the low building, Violet grabbed Olga's arm and stopped her from rushing inside. "We don't know what's in there waiting for us," Violet said quietly.

Olga nodded silently. The two of them moved cautiously through the clinic door. A light was on inside.

They tiptoed through the waiting room in the dark. The only light on was the one over the bed. Charlie was there, sitting up with the blankets pulled up to his waist. Kubrick was in the visitor's chair. They had their heads together and they were whispering intensely.

Violet didn't like this. Somehow she didn't think Kubrick was listening to Charlie's interpretation of the space race. They looked as if they were telling secrets or making plans.

She stepped into the room. Charlie started and shot a guilty look her way. But Violet was distracted by —

By what exactly? A movement. Something odd. Something wrong. Charlie's skin had — had jumped for a moment. For a frame it was bigger and then it wasn't. The movement was so fast Violet wasn't sure she had seen it.

Olga turned to Kubrick. "You on duty?"

"Yeah." Kubrick got slowly to his feet. Insolent.

"We were concerned when we didn't see you outside," Olga said pointedly.

"On my way." Kubrick moved slowly toward the door. Big attitude.

Olga waited until he was gone and then stepped closer to the bed. "You shouldn't be overdoing it," she told Charlie. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine, just fine," Charlie said. "Don't worry. You can go to bed."

"Only if you promise to do the same," Olga said.

"Don't be hard on the kid," Charlie said, yawning hugely and slipping back down under the covers — maybe to sleep, Violet thought, or maybe to hide. "We were just talking about the good old days on Earth."

"Uh-hum," Olga said. "Well, that's enough talking for one day. Good night."

"Good night," Charlie echoed.

Olga and Violet moved toward the door. "Don't bother him again," Olga told Kubrick once they were outside. "He needs some rest."

Kubrick gave her a snotty salute and leaned back against the door frame.

"Good night," Violet told him.

"Yeah. Whatever."

Violet and Olga headed down the street, not talking until they were out of Kubrick's sight and hearing.

Olga glanced over her shoulder. "That was strange. Something felt wrong."

"What were they whispering about?" Violet asked.

"Something important."

The two of them stared at each other in the half darkness. "Maybe we should tell someone," Violet said.

"Yeah, probably," Olga said wearily. "But who?"

Violet had been thinking of Jobs. But that didn't make sense. He wasn't in charge any more than she was. Besides, she was irritated with him for his performance at dinner. So who, then? 2Face? Billy?

"Maybe we could e-mail Billy—" Violet said.

"What was that?" Olga turned toward the street, peered into the distance, and then began to run.

"What? What is it?" Violet yelled as she followed. But now she could hear it, too. Not the Meanies, as she'd feared. A human voice calling for help. Noyze. Yes — it was definitely Noyze. But where was she?

"On the other side of the wall!" Olga called. "Come on, help me!"

Violet and Olga pounded down the sidewalk. Now Violet could see Noyze. She was hitting the wall with her fists and yelling. Dr. Cohen stood next to her, looking around with the lost gaze of a child.

Violet felt her stomach lurch. Something had happened to Dr. Cohen. That much was clear. Olga ran straight through the wall, trusting Violet to pull her back through.

Noyze seemed to sag when she saw Olga emerge. She looked ragged, exhausted. "I didn't think anyone was coming!" she said. "I thought — God, I thought you could hear me but you weren't going to let us back in."

"We're here now," Olga said. "Violet?"

Olga's gaze landed somewhere over Violet's right shoulder. Now that Olga was on the other side of the wall, she couldn't see Violet.

Violet thrust one arm through the wall, careful to keep her feet firmly inside. She pulled Dr. Cohen through first. Then Noyze. Then Olga.

"Thank you," Noyze said shakily. "I — I was so scared. I thought I — we — were stuck outside for good."

"Everything's all right now," Olga said soothingly.

"Everything's all right." She took Dr. Cohen's hand, bent close to see her face in the half-light. "Angelique? Can you hear me?"

"Isn't it beautiful?" Dr. Cohen asked serenely. She squatted and ran one hand over the ground, her face filled with wonder. "Redredorange. Don't you see?"

Violet was chilled by the doctor's disconnect. Dr. Cohen had lost it. Like Alberto. Like Yago. She wondered if she would be staring at the world with a strange smile someday soon. Then she noticed the hole in the doctor's forehead and her stomach rolled. Another nightmare.

"Tell me what happened," Olga said.

Noyze took a deep breath. "The Meanies attacked us. They — they put some sort of probe into her head. I think they know everything now."

CHAPTER 16

"WE CAN'T WAIT WHILE YOU RUN UP AND DOWN IN THE ELEVATOR."

Hysteria. 2Face could feel it in the air. By the time she strode into Peet's at 10:15, word was out. Everyone knew the Meanies had read Dr. Cohen's brain. They knew what it meant. No more wait and see.

The Meanies would attack as soon as possible so that the humans wouldn't have time to change their defenses or create new weapons. Billy had already determined that any changes in the wall were too dangerous. They would be completely vulnerable for the time it took to switch programs.

2Face swept her gaze around the room. Tamara was passing out weapons.

Tamara looked calm. Tate, too. They were working quickly but efficiently. Good.

But now Jobs was hurrying toward her and he didn't look calm. He was moving too fast, with too much nervous energy. Kubrick, who was coming right behind him, was even worse. His eyes were wide and glittering; his mouth was twisted into a strange smile. Waiting for the imminent attack was getting to them.

"Are these all the weapons we have?" Jobs demanded. He was carrying a crossbow awkwardly, as far away from his body as possible. "Or is Billy making something different?"

"He's working on the wall," 2Face said. "Trying to find some way —"

"That's not what he asked you!" Kubrick said menacingly. "We need to know about the weapons. The Meanies could attack any second. Tell us!"

"I — I don't know," 2Face admitted reluctantly.

"I'll ask him."

"No," Jobs said. "That's not good enough. We may not have much time before the Meanies attack. If Billy can help at all he can do it best from down here. We can't wait while you run up and down in the elevator."

"It's too dangerous to bring Billy down here," 2Face said stiffly.

Now Mo'Steel and Violet and Edward had joined the circle. "Too dangerous for what?" Violet asked. "Your sense of importance?"

There had been times when Violet and 2Face had been on the same side, times when 2Face had admired Violet's anger. Now wasn't one of those times.

"If Billy gets hurt, we're helpless," 2Face said. "He needs to be protected."

2Face was talking quietly to show she was in control, but she knew everyone heard what she was saying. She'd become the focus of attention. She was aware of Tamara and Tate watching her from their corner. Olga and Burroway from over by the espresso machine. D-Caf on the couch. Anamull by the door. Only Charlie, Dr. Cohen, and Noyze were missing. And Yago.

Where was Yago? 2Face pushed away the thought. No time to worry about him now.

"2Face is right," Jobs said, suddenly switching sides, which 2Face found gratifying and reassuring. The others respected Jobs. "Without Billy, we're dead. He should be wherever is safest."

"We should *all* be wherever is safest," Kubrick raged.

"What is he hiding?" Olga asked.

2Face needed to end this conversation. No debates. No opinion gathering. No polls. She wasn't some democratically elected leader who could be corrupted and weakened by the people's will. She'd do whatever she thought best. Whatever she wanted.

"Billy stays where he is," she said firmly. "I'll go find out what's happening with the weapons. Any other questions?"

The others stared back at her, their hostility apparent. Only Jobs looked uncertain. Nobody spoke.

"Fine," 2Face said shortly. "I'll ask him about the weapons, then."

Yago came alone.

He alone would know when the raid was beginning. Anamull and D-Caf could no longer be trusted with information. Yago was no longer certain they were true followers of the path.

Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit had also come alone.

Good.

Yago approached the wall. He reached through with one hand.

Trembling, Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit exposed his tentacle. Yago grasped it and while the Meanie swooned, he pulled him through the wall and let go. The Meanie slowly regained his senses. He looked around him with surprise, slowly realizing where he was.

"When will the raid begin?" Yago demanded.

Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit drew his tentacle back into his suit. He sat back so that the screen on his chest was visible. "The raid has been canceled." The words scrolled across the screen in perfectly grammatical English.

"What? Why?"

"A woman called Dr. Cohen was captured by Those Who Still Follow Mother," Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit reported. "They extracted all of the information they needed from her. The raid is no longer necessary."

"Your information is good?" Yago asked. Now that his followers had broken with the main group of Meanies, they had to rely on spies for information.

"I believe it," Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit said. He still seemed distracted by his surroundings. He examined the fir trees of the east edge of the Zone with open interest.

Yago stared for a moment. Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit was a fool. But what he was suggesting made sense.

The raid had been his chance to play hero. His opportunity to make 2Face and Billy look stupid. They wouldn't know it was just a raid. They'd think it was the *real* attack. All he'd have to do was wait until the raid was winding down and then pretend to repel it. That would have driven a stake into the heart of 2Face's power.

Yago wanted a raid.

"How many of the True Followers of the Path are available, ready for battle?" he asked.

"Twenty-nine," Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit replied.

"That many?" Yago's smile grew slowly. "Well, we won't need all of them."

2Face closed the door of the cottage behind her with a feeling of immense relief. She felt safe here. She liked knowing Billy was safe here. The cottage was a refuge from all the anger and mistrust down in the Zone.

Billy was in the living room. Sitting on the couch. Wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and running shoes. He smiled at her as she came in.

"Everything's fine downstairs," 2Face said, a bit breathlessly. "They want to know about the ___"

"I was listening," Billy said.

"Oh, okay, so — what do you want me to tell them?" 2Face asked. She shrugged off the uncomfortable feeling of being watched from above. Just like she'd shrugged off her certainty that Billy knew all about the fire that had ruined her face.

"I think I should tell them," Billy said.

"What?"

"I want to go down to the Zone."

2Face looked around the cozy room, desperate to talk Billy out of leaving. She couldn't quite understand her reluctance. Only that she felt afraid for Billy. She knew how hard it was for him to wrestle with Mother and control the wall and will the Remnants' weapons into existence. How could he do all that with Kubrick nagging at him? And what would happen to her — to all of them — if Billy's concentration faltered?

"If I stay here, you will lose your credibility," Billy said. "They think you are hiding me. Olga even wonders if I am still alive."

2Face went to Billy. Sat next to him. Took his hand. "Something about this feels wrong," she said.

"Yes," Billy agreed. "But the point is to defend the Zone. And if I have to go down to help make that happen, then I have to go down."

CHAPTER 17

"WHY RUN? WE'RE ALREADY DEAD."

"Look who's here," Tate said.

Tamara nodded almost imperceptibly.

Billy had just walked into Peet's. He was heading in their direction. 2Face was at his side. A chaperon. Or bodyguard.

"I understand you had some questions about the weapons," Billy said.

"Yes, sir," Tamara said.

Tate glanced at Tamara in disbelief. Sir?

Tamara and Tate had spent hours discussing weapons around their kitchen table. Tate had drawn out Tamara's expertise with dozens, hundreds, thousands of questions.

Tate wished Tamara would speak up now. But she knew she wouldn't. Tamara had been trained to take orders. Trained to accept authority. Tate was the one who'd sent Tamara's ideas and concerns to Billy. She signed Tamara's name to the e-mails because she thought 2Face would respect Tamara's opinion more.

"Can you create some sort of lightweight body armor?" Tate asked Billy now. She had to talk fast because the others—Jobs, Kubrick, Yago - were pressing around, waiting for their opportunity to talk to Billy.

"Yes." As Billy spoke, silvery mail began to grow over Tamara's ankles and race up to cover her cargo pants and skinny black tank top. Within seconds, she looked as if she were wearing a metallic wet suit over her clothes.

"Too heavy," Tamara said. "We're only concerned with covering the vital organs," Tate said. "Cutting out the arms and legs will make it much lighter."

The arms and legs disappeared. Tamara looked ridiculous with her cargo pants billowing out from under the tight-fitting mail.

"Better under the clothes?" Tate said. Now Tamara was wearing her cargo pants and tee over the mail. She still looked ridiculous. "How is it?" Tate asked.

"Good," Tamara said simply. "What else?" Tate asked.

"I want to —" Kubrick started. 2Face waved him off. "Weapons first. Nothing is more important than that."

Kubrick's expression was stormy, but he quieted down.

"What else?" Tate asked Tamara again.

"The crossbows," Tamara said.

Tate nodded. "They are all the same size. Big. Can you personalize them to fit each shooter?"

"Yes."

Tate's crossbow, which she was holding in one hand, shrank slightly. She welcomed the drop in weight. Mail was growing under her clothes. The same thing was happening to the others. Everyone was crowding around Billy now. Only Noyze, Dr Cohen, and Charlie were absent at this point.

Tate and Tamara exchanged smiles. After days of drafting e-mails and waiting in vain for a response, it felt great to speak directly to Billy. Tate's mind ran with the ideas she and Tamara had bantered around.

"The cannons," Tamara said.

Tate nodded. "We don't have enough gunpowder for the number of cannons you made."

Slight nod from Billy. "What else?"

"I've got a few things to say to you," Kubrick said, more insistently this time.

"Wait," 2Face said. She gave Kubrick a withering look.

Billy held up one hand, but it was the expression on his face that stopped her "Riders," he said, "To the northeast."

"Where's that?" Tate asked. _

"Burroway's backyard," someone said. And then the chaos began.

Uh-oh, Yago thought. He'd been prepared for the fake raid he'd ordered. Not this.

He hung back as Mo'Steel, Jobs, D-Caf, Kubrick, and Violet grabbed weapons and ran outside.

"Olga, call Charlie, Noyze, and Dr. Cohen," 2Face ordered. "We need all hands on deck."

Olga nodded. She picked up her link.

Tamara thrust a crossbow into Yago's hands. She was passing them out around the room. "Come on!" she yelled.

Yago had no intention of rushing into the fray. He was The One. Not a pawn. Not someone who could risk being crushed in some meaningless battle. And yet he didn't want to look like a total coward. Bad for the image. His job was to inspire and command.

"Right!" Yago turned to the stragglers — Olga, Burroway, Edward — and motioned them out the door. He'd bring up the rear. The distant rear.

They came out into the dark street and ran toward Burroway's vulgar mini-manor house. Riders — two, three dozen of them — were rushing toward the other side of the wall. They stopped about twenty feet from where 2Face, Tamara, and the others stood next to Burroway's ornate Victorian gazebo. Billy stood with the others, but he was unarmed.

One of the Riders came forward, zooming back and forth in front of the wall while the others held back.

"Are they going to attack?" the twitch, D-Caf, asked.

"Loser," Anamull said. "They can't even see us."

Or could they?

The lead Rider shrieked, an unholy cry like metal gears grinding on ball bearings. Then he threw a boomerang directly toward Billy.

2Face pushed him out of the way.

Tamara knelt, shot her crossbow. The arrow flew through the wall and shattered the carapace of the lead Rider. The boomerang struck the wall and fell with an audible clatter.

The Riders surged closer.

2Face shot. Then Kubrick, Violet, D-Caf, Anamull joined in. Their arrows hit Rider heads, legs. Bounced off the ground, trees.

Yago saw there was no danger and moved aggressively up to the front. He shot, hit a tree, cursed, reloaded.

"Stop!" Jobs called. "They can't get us through the wall."

"Edward — stop!" Jobs yelled to his little brother.

The kid, the chameleon freak, dropped his crossbow. But the others kept blazing away with crossbows and pistols. Jobs turned away in disgust.

What a Boy Scout, Yago thought.

Three minutes later all of the Riders were gone.

Noyze, Charlie, and Dr. Cohen arrived just as the firing died down. In a booming voice, Charlie demanded to know what was happening. Jobs walked toward them, arms open, explaining.

D-Caf and Roger Dodger got up from their shooting positions and moved closer to the wall, looking at the Riders who didn't get away.

"Get the hoverboards and weapons," Yago said out loud so it would look as if D-Caf and Roger Dodger were following his orders. Perfect. "That went well," he said to Tate. Tate smiled wanly and moved away to help Roger Dodger.

Olga and Mo'Steel were hugging. Lots of back patting going on. Lots of relieved grins and laughter. Two dozen Riders down and the humans hadn't gotten so much as a scratch.

Instinct told Yago to cover his back. He turned in time to see a cloud of dark-suited Meanies flying low over *Billyville*. Heading their way.

Lots of Meanies. Way more than twenty-nine. These weren't his Meanies.

Yago's throat shrank a size.

"How did the Meanies breach the wall?" he roared. Someone had screwed up. Someone would pay. "Billy! What happened to your stupid wall?"

Billy simply stood watching the Meanies close in. Then 2Face grabbed his arm and began pulling him away.

"Take shelter!" Jobs yelled. "Get inside the house!"

Okay. So it wasn't time to point fingers. Yet. But Yago would make sure that time came.

Olga stared numbly at the sky. "Why run? We're already dead."

But Mo'Steel pushed her in front of him. "Come on. Mom. I'm not going to let you give up."

How *touching*, Yago thought nastily. And then he ran.

CHAPTER 18

"I THINK THEY'RE GIVING UP."

Get Billy safe, 2Face thought.

She dragged him toward Burroway's back door. He wasn't resisting her, but he wasn't helping, either. He seemed to be in some sort of a daze.

Halfway across the yard — *boom!* The first mini-missile hit. An oversized magnolia tree rose up, crashed down, white petals floating on the night breeze.

2Face stumbled, landed on all fours. She tasted dirt. She could feel the tender flesh swelling inside of her cheek. She'd bitten it.

"Stay down!" she yelled at Billy. The noise — mini-missiles whistling as they fell from the sky, shouts, cries, dirt and bark raining down — made it hard to think. And even harder to communicate.

The Remnants were spread all over the yard. Charlie, Noyze, and Dr. Cohen were on their bellies in the flower bed. Anamull was crouched under a teak bench. D-Caf and Yago were using the Rider hoverboards as shields and crawling toward the house. Beyond the wall, 2Face could see more Riders and Meanies gathered.

"Cannons!" Tamara yelled. "Get to the cannons."

Tamara, Tate, Mo'Steel, and Edward broke into a run for the town green, where the cannons were mounted. Firing cannons at fast-flying targets was pointless. 2Face could see that. But she couldn't take time to talk to Tamara and the others.

Jobs and Violet were squatting down next to the gazebo, firing their crossbows at low-flying Meanies. Another futile gesture. The arrows that hit the Meanies bounced off harmlessly.

Burroway had reached the house. He was standing on his back porch, staring up at the sky. It was amazing he wasn't hit. But, but — it took 2Face a moment to grasp this — the mini-missiles were only hitting the backyard. She was at the epicenter of the attack. Or, more to the point, Billy was.

The Meanies were closer now. A cannonball arched high into the air. The Meanies easily maneuvered away.

"Under the gazebo!" 2Face yelled. "Now!"

She rolled into the moist soil.

Billy didn't move. He stayed out in the open, rising slowly to his feet. Meanies clustered above him like a swarm of angry wasps. 2Face had the crazy idea Billy was drawing them on purpose, to give the others time to get away.

The Meanies opened fire with their fléchette guns. Fléchettes flew — enough to cut Billy down a thousand times. But the fléchettes bounced off as if they'd hit bulletproof glass. Billy had raised some sort of personal defensive bubble or force field around himself.

2Face was starting out of her hiding place when she heard — not exactly Billy's voice but his presence — in her head. "Stay where you are."

Good advice. She stayed put.

Billy disappeared under a hail of fléchettes. The ground around him boiled as the thousands of shards of metal hit.

"No!" 2Face yelled.

The barrage of fléchette fire slowed, then stopped. Billy was still standing in the middle.

Untouched

The Meanies stopped firing. Circled. Obviously considering their next move.

Violet and Jobs reloaded their crossbows, staring uneasily up at the sky. D-Caf was firing wildly. Where was 2Face's crossbow? She didn't have it, couldn't remember dropping it.

"Hold your fire!" Jobs yelled. "I think they're giving up."

The Meanies were not giving up. They spread out and opened fire again. Now they weren't just firing at Billy. Now the entire Zone was under attack.

A slide show of images. Burroway ducking into his kitchen. Dr Cohen rolling limply downhill toward the wall. Yago running frantically toward Billy. The smell of trampled fresh grass.

What to do? What to do?

Billy said to stay put. 2Face stayed put.

Fléchettes rained down. The grass hopped like popcorn in hot oil. Yago was running, picking up speed. Was he going to break Billy's protective bubble?

"Billy!"

Yago hit the invisible barrier and bounced away. He dropped his hoverboard and fell facedown in the dirt. Yago was moaning low. He was only a few feet away.

Unfair 2Face was going to have to risk her life to pull Yago to safety or sit a few feet away and let him die. Great. Reluctantly she crawled out into the yard. "Yago! Over here! Get under the gazebo!" No response.

2Face crawled closer. Two feet from Yago, something hit her broadside. Charlie.

He tackled her, pinned her to the ground. 2Face reeled, the pain in her mouth exploding. Her vision blurred, spun. What was happening? Why was Charlie attacking her? Had he totally lost it?

Charlie grabbed her arms. She struggled. She could feel Charlie lift her up, sling her over his back. He walked, hunched over with her weight. Fléchettes stung the backs of her legs, imbedded themselves in her lightweight armor.

I'm done, she thought. At the same time, she wondered, illogically, if the fléchette wounds would scar. Why was Charlie carrying her? It made no sense. And then —

Silence.

2Face opened her eyes and saw Billy near. She couldn't hear the missiles falling. Couldn't hear the others moan and shout. She was inside Billy's bubble.

So peaceful.

No more of those noisy fléchettes.

"Billy?" 2Face called out in her mind. Billy stood completely still. Eyes closed. Skin an oxygen-starved gray. He was somewhere else, no doubt concentrating fiercely to keep the wall up and the weapons in existence.

Charlie dumped her to the ground. 2Face closed her eyes. A nap would be nice. Yes, she didn't mind if she napped.

Then a synapse fired in 2Face's brain and the facts connected. Charlie had used her as a shield to get close to Billy.

Charlie was a traitor. A spy.

2Face had to stop him. But —

But she was so sleepy. The darkness was closing in. Her thoughts were confused, drifting. Was she still awake? Yes. Yes, she could crawl. She rolled over onto her stomach, churning up the pain in her mouth, and crawled toward Billy.

Charlie was right there. A foot away. Less. They were both inside Billy's bubble. But why wasn't Charlie attacking Billy? Or trying to stop her? Ah. That's when Charlie began to scratch. 2Face inched closer to Billy as Charlie ran his fingernails frantically over his arms, torso, scalp.

His skin jumped out, stretching as thousands of needles rose up under his skin. Drops of blood formed and began to run off his body like sweat. 2Face's blurry gaze was drawn to his forehead. Silvery sharp points like the prongs of serving forks poked through the skin. The points shredded Charlie's clothes. Scraps of material fell away.

The quills grew. More quills sprang out of his chest and back and arms and legs. He moaned and shouted as they popped violently out of his lips and tongue. Thousands of quills. Each two feet long. Gleaming. Needle sharp.

Deadly.

With the last of her energy, 2Face threw herself at Billy's still form. Clung to him. Hugged him tight.

A human shield.

Charlie — the porcupine thing that Charlie had become — ran blindly at them. He hit 2Face and clung like a human-sized burr.

2Face lost herself in the pain.

CHAPTER 19

WHY DELAY THE INEVITABLE?

One second, Billy's mind was busy with more than 16.1 billion discrete tasks.

He was maintaining 12,044 wall panels, twenty-four crossbows, twenty-four pistols, 512 arrows, 2,424 bullets, one protective bubble, six cannons, forty-eight cannonballs, 2.4 pounds of gunpowder, seventeen suits of body armor, ten houses, seventeen palm trees, sixteen oak trees, two red maple trees, one white magnolia tree, 46,524 blades of grass, 2,000,388 pounds of mixed loam, 5,012 square feet of blacktop, 12,344 square feet of sidewalks, 400 linear feet of white picket fence, six "butlers," one "barrista," one cineplex, two "ticket takers," six "shoe salesmen," twelve "attractive female pedestrians," one "sun," one "moon," 312 "stars," thirty-one Rider swamps, fifty-two hillocks, forty-seven acres of tall dry grass, 6,100 quiver trees, 1,040,000 gallons of copper-colored water, 64,000 pounds of peaty Rider-environment soil, and more, more, more.

One second, he could see the Zone from a thousand angles. He could see the Meanies from above, from below, from the sides. He could see each mini-missile as it fell. He could see each fl chette and each wound they caused.

Then a tiny fraction of time passed and Charlie attacked 2Face and Billy's mind cleared of everything except her internal howl of pain.

Got you!

Charlie laughed. He was half blinded by the quills poking out from the side of his nose and from his own blood running into his eyes. And yet he had still gotten Billy! Now Mother would be his personal playground to share with Amelia and Duncan and nobody else. Now they would never have to gaze, on the torched remains of Earth.

Was Billy really gone?

Amelia said to make sure he was gone.

Charlie turned his head to the left and then the right, trying to get a better look at Billy. This was the first time he'd impaled someone on his quills. Turned out it was hard to get a good view. Hard to focus on something so close by.

He could see ...

Black hair. Good, good.

One almond-shaped eye.

Almond-shaped?

Wait. Billy didn't have almond-shaped eyes!

No. No, no ... NO! He'd missed Billy and gotten that girl instead. Boy, was *she* bossy. Almost as bad as Amelia.

Amelia.

Amelia had sent him to destroy Billy. Not 2Face. When Amelia found out about this, he was going to be in some deep doo-doo.

What to do?

Okay. Think.

Pull in the quills, lose 2Face, and get Billy. That's what he had to do. One problem: He'd never had to pull in the quills quickly. He had no idea how long it would take. Well. His mother always said a journey of a thousand miles began with a single step. Better get started.

Kubrick's crossbow shimmered. Disappeared. The ground in front of him wavered, knocking him sideways, and then held.

"The wall's collapsing!" Olga yelled. "Run!" The Remnants began to flee. D-Caf rushed to Kubrick. Then Yago, Anamull, Violet, Burroway. Kubrick didn't run. He stood in one place, feeling his familiar rage. Rage directed at no one but himself.

It was hard to tell from this side, but apparently the wall was down because Riders were rushing in, howling their hideous war cry. Meanies swooped down from the sky, zeroing in on individuals as they ran.

Kubrick saw Tamara stumble and take a concentrated burst of fl chette fire. Not pretty. Tate was trying to help her up, trying to get her out of harm's way. He could have helped them — but why bother?

They were all dead meat.

It was just a matter of time.

Why delay the inevitable?

Kubrick stood staring at 2Face, still hanging from Charlie's quills. Her face was the image of agony, but she wasn't dead.

Judging from the look on her face, she probably wished she was.

Charlie had lied. Charlie had told Kubrick he was going to get rid of Billy. *Billy* — not 2Face. Kubrick had been sure that once Billy was out of the way, 2Face would see they belonged together.

Now 2Face was dying and it was Kubrick's fault.

Charlie never could have carried out his plan without Kubrick's help.

Charlie was going to pay. Yes.

Charlie was going to pay.

And so was Kubrick. He ran in the opposite direction as the others. He ran toward Charlie and 2Face and Billy.

Kubrick had no weapon. He had no plan. All he knew was that he would get 2Face free.

He was still steps away when Charlie somehow loosed 2Face and dumped her unceremoniously on the ground. Billy was down on his knees, covering her wounds with his hands and weeping like a little baby. For a moment, Kubrick's steps slowed and he was unsure of what to do. Then: crystal clarity. "You!" Kubrick yelled at Charlie.

Charlie couldn't respond. His tongue was a pincushion.

Kubrick whacked the half-blind Charlie with his left arm, making him stumble backward. Quills pierced his skin but he couldn't feel it. The artificial skin Mother had given him had no nerve endings. He felt a stab of fear when he saw his own blood gush. But then his anger trumped his fear just like it always did. He swung again.

CHAPTER 26

"WE CAN'T JUST LEAVE HER!"

"Welcome, my Children!" Yago stood in the middle of Burroway's backyard and raised his open hands to the sky.

Overhead he could see Yago's Razor-Sharp Wit and Yago's Buff Biceps and the other twenty-seven followers of the True Path rushing in and attacking the remaining Children of Mother.

A long overdue housecleaning. Soon only the Pure would remain. Soon they would build a paradise of the Pure where Yago would rule.

Ignoring the fléchettes that still rained down, Yago raised his hands even higher in an embrace of his righteous followers. Soon. Soon.

Stop, Mo'Steel silently commanded his hoverboard. He hopped down and ran across the uneven ground. The grass was disappearing. In places metal flooring was visible through the dirt.

Noyze was down on her hands and knees next to Dr. Cohen. Overhead, the Meanies were hammering away.

"Noyze! Noyze, are you hurt?" Mo'Steel called. Noyze raised her tear-stained face. "No. But she — she won't come with me —"

Jobs glanced toward Burroway's house. A pair of Riders was coming through the side yard. They let loose a high-pitched shriek when they saw the humans. Mo'Steel heard one of their swords clanging. "Time to go," Jobs said.

Mo'Steel dropped to his knees next to Noyze. "It's okay, everything is going to be okay." He began to pull her gently to her feet. "I'm sorry, but Jobs is right, we've got to go."

"We can't just leave her!" Noyze wailed. "Go with Jobs," Mo'Steel said. "I'll get Dr. Cohen and catch up —"

Mo'Steel gave Jobs a meaningful look and Jobs somehow understood what he wanted him to do. Jobs pulled Noyze onto his hoverboard. They zoomed off ahead of the Riders.

"Dr. Cohen — come on." Mo'Steel pulled on the doctor's arm, but she pulled free angrily and went back to staring at a blade of grass.

Mo'Steel had no weapon. Not even a rock to toss. The Riders were closing in.

"Come and get me, you big ugly bugs!" Mo'Steel yelled.

Mo'Steel jumped onto his hoverboard. He rode across the fragmented backyard in big slow loops. Maybe the Riders would follow him and forget Dr. Cohen. Especially if he looked easy to catch.

"Yo, two-headed freaks!" Mo'Steel looked over his shoulder to see if the Riders were following.

One of the Riders landed beside Dr. Cohen.

Violet was crawling toward Burroway's gazebo on her hands and knees. She was focused on reaching the skimpy shelter and praying it would still be there when she got there.

Meanies were zooming insanely low and taking aim from only a few feet in the sky. Riders were chasing them down with spears.

And the Zone was dissolving in weird nightmare fashion. She was crawling through dirt because the grass was gone. Burroway's house had simply vanished, disappeared so quickly Violet had said "poof" in her mind when she saw it go.

Worse, Violet's crossbow had disappeared. She still had her pistol — but for how long? And if her body armor disappeared, the Meanies' fléchettes would kill her.

What did it mean? Why was the environment breaking up? Was Billy dead? No, if he were dead, everything would be gone, wouldn't it? Maybe he was hurt or the Meanies had gotten him or ...

Violet wrenched her mind away from that. She had to concentrate on getting safe, if that was still possible. How many of the others were still alive? With her face in the dirt, Violet couldn't tell.

A dull *pung, pung, pung*.

Fléchettes zinged into the dirt all around her. Violet felt one rip through her calf and screamed at the searing pain. Forget crawling. She struggled to her feet, ran. Fléchette fire pursued her. She rolled under the flimsy wooden gazebo, listening to the fléchettes tear up the deck above her and breathing hard.

"Violet? Is that you?"

"Olga! Yes. You okay?"

"Fine, I think."

Violet's eyes were adjusting to the gloom of the crawl space. She could see Olga had someone cradled across her lap. A small form. Fear clutched Violet's throat. Please, please don't let it be Edward. Jobs couldn't handle it if Edward was hurt. Violet wasn't even sure Jobs was all right, but if he was —

"Who's that?" Violet asked fearfully.

"D-Caf," Olga said. "His armor is gone."

Violet could make out D-Caf now. His eyes were open and unseeing. The fléchettes had turned his scalp, his shoulders, his feet into raw meat.

"What about everyone else?" Violet asked.

"I don't know," Olga said. "I — I can't see what's happening from under here."

"Jobs?"

"I don't know!"

Something in Olga's tone made Violet go cold with fear. Did she know something about Jobs? Was she hiding something? Suddenly, Violet felt quite certain Jobs was dead. How could anyone survive out there?

"God, he was just a kid," Olga said, her voice half strangled.

Violet had to remind herself they were talking about D-Caf. "Can't we do something to help him?" she asked. The question made Violet's fingers and toes vibrate nervously. Olga couldn't do anything to help him. But *she* could. If she had the guts.

"How?" Olga asked softly.

"A transfusion, an operation —" Violet said wildly.

"How can we go on like this?" Olga said despairingly. "We're like the last few specimens of some sad endangered species left in a zoo. We're not really alive. Not anymore. Everything's over but the dying."

It was Olga — not D-Caf — who gave Violet the courage to do it. D-Caf meant nothing to her. But Olga, Olga was good. Violet could see that from the way she loved her son. Violet wanted to take away Olga's hopeless tone.

Violet began to cry from fear and humiliation, knowing what was coming, knowing how the others would react. But she wouldn't let herself stop. She sank deep within herself, concentrating on the worms, inviting them out to play.

"Olga?" she whispered, "Can you keep a secret?"

Olga glanced up and then jumped violently back. "Violet! Violet, my god, are you — what's happening? What's happening? Please, no ..."

The worms responded at once. Violet immediately felt their mobile bodies stirring in her bone marrow, twisting, stretching, wiggling. They feasted on the half-digested food in her stomach and intestine and bowels. Then, fortified, they began racing along the bones of her legs, arms, and spine.

The worms multiplied rapidly — two is four is sixteen is 256 is 65,536 is 4,294,967,296 — and moved out into her muscles. Now Violet could smell their earthy skins. Thousands of worms weaving energetically up and down, piercing her skin, gobbling her liver (they *loved* liver), tunneling into her heart, devouring her eyeballs, and worming their way into her brain.

Violet gave herself over to them. Letting go felt like reaching an old and persistent itch. At first, the release was almost delicious. Almost — because she couldn't forget the shame, the horror of what was happening to her.

Then came the pain and she almost welcomed it. Her stomach cramped. Her muscles began to scream as the little worm heads drilled a thousand holes through calves, thighs, abdomen. Organs deep inside that she couldn't name pulled apart. The pain grew, grew, grew — and just as she felt insane with it — it reached an exquisite crescendo and receded.

The worms had been coming to her for a long time. Almost as long as she'd been awake on this ship. Violet had fought them at first. At first, it was easy. At first, in the days just after Mo'Steel sliced off her finger and saved her life, the worms were just a wiggle in her hand that she could tamp down. But the wiggle had grown, spread. The worms had begun to come out when she was sleeping.

She couldn't stop them and after a while she hadn't wanted to. She'd felt weak and wrong until the morning Roger Dodger had died in her basement.

Now she knew what she had to do.

CHAPTER 21

"SAVE US ALL."

Burroway's gazebo disappeared, revealing two figures. Olga and, and — Jobs let his hoverboard swerve wildly. Noyze struggled to stay on board.

"What's wrong?" Mo'Steel demanded. But then he saw what Jobs saw. "Oh, no. God, what is that? Mom? Mom! Get away from there!"

"Worms," Jobs whispered.

"Is it Amelia?" Noyze demanded.

"No," Jobs said. "No, it's — different."

The three of them stared at the patch of dirt where the gazebo used to be, unable to look away. A seething mass of pea-green worms slithered and writhed. Olga was crawling away, hiding her face, sobbing.

D-Caf's flesh bubbled, pushed out by the ravenous worms. Then the worms seemed to recede, to melt, to disappear. They revealed a perfect, uninjured D-Caf.

"Wh — what's happening?" D-Caf asked, sitting up shakily.

Olga went into hysterics, covering her mouth and doing an all-over body scream. "He's dead," she babbled, pointing at D-Caf. "He's dead and he's talking and — he's dead."

"What do you mean?" D-Caf looked just as freaked out as the rest of them. "What happened to all those fléchettes that hit me? How come I'm not bleeding?"

Jobs didn't have time to make sense of this because the worms were receding further. Now he could see Violet's lovely blond hair and pale blue eyes emerging from the seething mass. He ran to her, stopping a few feet away. Those worms were dangerous. They'd killed Big Bill. And they'd come close to killing Violet, too.

"Violet?"

"Don't get too close. Jobs."

Was she warning him — or mocking his fear? Jobs couldn't tell, wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Violet's eyes were sad as the last of the worms sank down under her skin and vanished.

"Violet, what just happened?" Noyze asked. "Are you okay?"

"I saved him," Violet said. "D-Caf is as good as new now."

"Thanks." D-Caf's tone was wondering, grateful, amazed.

"You are like me now," Violet said harshly. "The worms are inside you. That is the price you have to pay."

D-Caf's expression grew thoughtful and then frightened. "I can feel them. In my bones. A sort of — wiggling."

Jobs fell to his knees and felt hot tears on his cheeks. Violet, oh, Violet. She was always so afraid of the worms....

"Is he still human?" Olga called out from where she was huddling against a tree trunk. "Are you?"

Violet turned to them all with a strange smile, "I don't know, Olga. Are any of us?"

2Face opened one eye and saw Billy gazing down at her. Everything was far off and floating, except for the pain. The pain was sharp as steel. Her side. Her leg. Her chest. She could hear her breath rasping in and out.

Tears filled her eyes. She was going to die and she wasn't ready. She wasn't ready. She'd struggled so hard. It wasn't fair. She didn't want to die.

Billy's lips weren't moving but 2Face could hear his voice in her head and it was saying: "Lie still. Lie still and don't worry. Everything is going to be okay. Just close your eyes and relax."

Did Billy understand? Did he know she wanted to live? His eyes were so sad. Or was he telling her to accept death? Because she wouldn't. Death was defeat.

"Billy," she gasped, setting off bursts of hot pain through her ribs. "Save us. Save me, Billy. Save us all."